

Habitat for Humanity homeowner 'grateful but proud'

By Michael DeRuyter, Record staff

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KITCHENER — Penny Harvey bought a barbecue.

It's nothing special, just your standard propane barbecue, ready to sit on an everyday back porch. The important thing is that it won't be sitting on an everyday back porch, however: it will be on Penny Harvey's back porch.

Having her own porch is one of the many things that Harvey and her daughter Georgina can look forward to as they prepare to move into their very first house later this year, thanks to Habitat for Humanity.

The funny thing is, Harvey admits she isn't even a good cook.

"I'm pretty sure I'll be able to burn food pretty well though," she said with a laugh.

Laughing comes easily for Harvey these days as one of the many people that Habitat for Humanity helps take ownership of a home. The non-profit organization helps provide affordable housing for low-income families in the hope of breaking the cycle of poverty.

Habitat for Humanity, Waterloo Region has built or renovated 89 homes in 23 years, said Jerry Lawlor, director of development.

"Some people just need some help to get the point of owning a home and get over that hurdle," Lawlor said. "Habitat for Humanity helps them achieve that."

It's people like Harvey that Lawlor and Habitat for Humanity Waterloo hopes to reach as part of the new 360 Built Smart Partnership.

The partnership, launched May 31, focuses financial donations from companies such as Home Depot, Holchim, RBC, Everyday Essentials and Schneider Electric toward five pillars of affordable housing. Lawlor said Habitat for Humanity Waterloo will be directing funds toward family outreach and financial education.

"We will be using the funds to penetrate various markets and identify ourselves with potential families," he said. "We hope to target various demographics within the region and make sure that we're accessible to them."

Part of the program is target marketing and advertising, to combat what Lawlor said is a disconnect between the organization and the people they can help in the community.

"We want to be in places where hard-working low income families will be," he said.

Harvey fit that description after moving to the region 10 years ago. A single mother, she got a job with Home Depot. A friend in the region suggested she volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, and she volunteered on a building site.

"I thought it was an amazing organization to volunteer with, but I'd never thought I'd be in the position of getting a house," she said.

A few years later, while working, she started talking to Carleen Nickeo, who was at the Home Depot taking part in a fundraiser for the organization. Harvey, who had only ever rented apartments, said it was too bad they didn't help provide houses for smaller families. But Nickeo told her differently, and suggested she attend an information session.

Harvey attended with her daughter, and a year later she got a call from the organization.

"I remember getting the call at work saying that I'd got a house," Harvey said. "I immediately put down the phone and did a happy dance."

The townhome Harvey will be moving into is located near the corner of Ottawa Street South and Westmount



habitat. Penny Harvey and her daughter Georgina plan to move into a Habitat for Humanity townhouse in Kitchener in November. Peter Lee/Record staff Source: Record staff

Drive. Harvey is excited about what the house means to her 12-year-old daughter.

"She keeps saying to me 'We can do what we want! It's ours!' " Harvey said with a laugh.

Not only is home itself a treat, but its location appeals to Harvey, who doesn't own a car.

Working at Home Depot has given her a chance to catch up and learn about the joys of owning a home.

"One of the advantages of working there is that I get to read all of the do-it-yourself guides while I'm on break," she said

People who move into Habitat for Humanity homes have to fulfil 500 hours of sweat equity in lieu of having to make a down payment. This sweat equity can be anything from volunteering with the organization in a number of ways or directly helping to build the home. In addition, people who do live in the house will pay a mortgage, albeit a restructured one.

The stigma surrounding what Habitat for Humanity does could not be more wrong, Harvey said.

"It's not for poor people," she adamantly said. "It's for people needing a hand up, not a hand out."

Lawlor echoes Harvey on this point.

"One of the biggest misconceptions about what we do is that we give away homes," he said. "The people who receive these homes work hard."

Harvey said it was a down payment that kept her as a renter so long.

"Everybody dreams about owning a home, but the biggest obstacle was making a down payment," she said. "You can only split one paycheque so many ways, especially with a 12-year-old daughter who wants all the latest gadgets," she added with a laugh.

Harvey hopes to move into the home in November, and is already ready to embrace a new role as homeowner.

"I'm grateful but proud," she said. "I'm showing that as a single mother, you can do it."

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