

Sarasota Magazine

Building A Better Sarasota

THE HBA OF SARASOTA REACHES DEEP INTO OUR COMMUNITY

February 01, 2001 | COLLINS, MARY ALICE

Crafting comfortable living spaces with top-grade materials and innovative design certainly defines quality construction. But forging links between community members and creating a solid base of volunteerism leaves an even more lasting impression on the Sarasota landscape. The Home Builders Association (HBA) of Sarasota County seeks to achieve all of the aforementioned goals and in doing so, to put together something of lasting value.

"We are not just builders of homes," explains Jeff Eslinger, current president of the HBA. "We are citizens, too. Many of us were born and raised right here, and our roots go deep. We have a broad base of expertise with a singular desire to have a positive effect on those around us."

Chartered to represent all facets of the building industry, HBA provides and promotes quality housing for area residents. Member firms are diverse in size and activities. Included in its roster are residential and commercial builders, remodelers, subcontractors, suppliers and professionals related to the building industry. Member firms, explains Eslinger, seek to insure that consumers have access to quality products and services of optimum value provided by reputable members. "But we are not just about building houses," he emphasizes. "The HBA seeks to have a real impact on this community."

And sometimes that happens, one home at a time. Consider the Paul Salter story. Rampart Homes president John King was attending his regular United Way board of directors meeting when he first heard the news of a 14-year-old Sarasota boy catastrophically injured during a football scrimmage. King took the story to his fellow HBA members, who immediately volunteered to remodel Paul's Sarasota home for the special needs of this young quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down with spinal cord damage almost identical to the injury suffered by actor Christopher Reeve. Once it was determined that extensive modifications were impossible on the Salter home and that the family's monetary resources were limited, the HBA changed direction. They decided to build from the ground up and present Paul with a custom home suited perfectly to his special needs.

"Nobody in Paul's family ever asked for anything," says King, who has spearheaded the project. "This was an outpouring of support from local suppliers and contractors who simply wanted to help. Everything, from tile selections and doorway openings to shower hardware and ramps, is custom-designed for Paul. Materials have all been donated and labor volunteered for free. We are even trying to furnish his study space with a specialized computer featuring a mouse operated by a mouth-held device." Located at 4920 Camphor Avenue in Sarasota, the house was started in mid-October.

Such commitment to community is built into the HBA. The 400-plus membership forms an impressive umbrella organization offering shelter to charitable causes, political issues, other building organizations and environmental concerns. When these contractors leave the job sites, they drive downtown to board meetings for Easter Seals, United Way, Girls and Boys Clubs, Happiness House, UNICEF and Day of Sharing. Blueprints and spec sheets are put aside so builders can study county commission agendas and growth management charts. Many HBA members are active in professional organizations like the Master Home Builders Council. Often, they meet to discuss timely topics such as development east of I-75, Smart Growth, the Village Concept and Green Building.

"Beyond the task of creating new homes, we are trying to develop standards for sustainable living," explains HBA vice president Thomas A. Gilmore, who's also president of Lemon Bay Builders Inc. and general contractor for the Florida House, a model of energy-efficiency and other sustainable building practices. "While Green Building implements water and energy conservation along with the use of recycled materials, sustainable living mandates a neutral use of resources. Whatever one uses, one puts back." The practical application means that trees are saved or replaced. Native vegetation is kept intact for landscaping. Lawns are small to limit water usage. Site location is carefully researched so that homes are positioned advantageously.

"How many times have we seen west-facing porches with no shade that homeowners cannot use for six or eight months out of the year?" asks Gilmore. "Many expensive homes reveal improper window design, with poor placement, no tinting and sizes inadequate to help cool the interior. Electricity costs soar when inferior insulation is used and oversized air conditioning units are installed to compensate. With the right insulation, you can keep an attic 30 degrees cooler. Programmable thermostats allow you to control humidity and make a house feel cooler, even though the temperature is kept higher than with traditional cooling systems."

Gilmore went on to say that Green Building and sustainable living concepts go beyond properly designed overhangs and using locally manufactured materials. Builders are also being urged by the HBA to educate consumers about their options. "Classes on Green Building and Green Remodeling are offered at the Florida House, and we hope that consumers will come out and see what can be done," says Gilmore. "There are lots of ways to build green without incurring high costs, but things will continue to be done the old way until consumers ask for something different. Once we show homeowners how to look at their house as a whole functioning system, they will demand change and builders will respond."

Forward-thinking advocates like Gilmore envision future neighborhoods modeled on the "village concept," blending retail and residential buildings with a centralized commercial "core" fanning out with shops, schools, multi-family dwellings and single family homes. They argue for well-planned communities with plenty of green space and home construction suited to the landscape and climate of Southwest Florida. And the HBA will soon offer yet another service for consumers desiring the latest information from the building industry. Eslinger is establishing a Speakers' Bureau of eight to 10 HBA members who will voluntarily visit area organizations and keep consumers informed and up-to-date on everything from new construction options to legislation. "We are excited to teach out in this way to educate citizens and answer their questions," says Eslinger. "The more we can offer to the community, the better builders we become."

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