

Habitat Executive Leads Group in a New Direction

*By Carol Hazard
Richmond Times Dispatch
April 12, 2010*

Think Habitat for Humanity. What probably comes to mind are small, ordinary houses built one at a time in low-income neighborhoods.

Think again.

Leisha G. LaRiviere, in four years as the head of the Richmond Metropolitan Habitat for Humanity, is moving the organization far beyond the old business model for the ecumenical Christian housing organization.

The president and CEO of Richmond Habitat has met with city planners and administrators to find out what kind of affordable housing they want in their communities -- and it is not the traditional Habitat house.

She has tapped into the talent at the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects to design architecturally interesting houses.

She's an advocate for mixed-income communities and new urbanism, with an aim toward revitalizing neighborhoods and deconcentrating poverty levels.

"Leisha is the real deal -- a combination of a very keen mind with a good heart and energy galore," said John Moeser, a Richmond Habitat board member, a senior fellow at the University of Richmond and a retired professor in urban studies and planning from Virginia Commonwealth University.

LaRiviere traveled to Habitat for Humanity International's headquarters in Atlanta to make a case for raising the income limits traditionally served by the nonprofit so housing opportunities could open up for such people as firefighters, police officers, nurses and teachers. She succeeded.

Habitat International adopted a nationwide policy to serve the expanded income group while keeping its focus on families who earn 30 percent to 60 percent of an area's median income. "She is a quick study regardless of the complexity of the project or the assignment," Moeser said. "She loves people -- and she has a joyous spirit."

Most leaders are strategic thinkers. LaRiviere can handle detail as well, Moeser said. "Not all leaders have that capacity."

In 2006, Richmond Habitat was the first of 51 affiliates in Virginia to build an Energy Star home with energy-saving appliances.



DEAN HOFFMEYER/TIMES-DISPATCH
Leisha G. LaRiviere has been the head of Richmond Metropolitan Habitat for Humanity for four years.

LaRiviere, a licensed general contractor, didn't stop there. All Habitat houses here are being built to EarthCraft standards, which use Earth-friendly building materials and practices in addition to energy-saving appliances.

Richmond Habitat's newest program, "Brush with Kindness," involves doing renovation work from small repairs to full-gut rehabs.

"The old Habitat model of building one small house at a time is not where the needs are or where the world is today," said G. Andrew Nea, an attorney with Williams Mullen who does pro bono work for Richmond Habitat.

"Leisha has led this organization to where it is developing wonderful communities," Nea said. "She has an amazing amount of energy, a continual ball of fire. I have never seen her down. She is always upbeat."

Homeowners still put in sweat equity to buy their houses. They still get loans with zero percent interest rates. And the nonprofit still relies on a work force of volunteers.

"Leisha is always looking for new ways to advance the mission of the organization," said Michelle Gluck, chairwoman of Richmond Habitat and general counsel at Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond.

...

The Pillars of Oakmont, Richmond Habitat's first mixed-income, row-house community, is going up at T and 33rd streets in Richmond's East End.

Twelve units will be sold to low and middle-income Habitat clients at discounts, starting in the \$90,000 range. Three will be sold at market value, ranging most likely from \$175,000 to \$190,000.

"It's a unique thing that Habitat does, and Leisha has led this organization in four years to be one of the top 20 in the nation," Nea said.

He cited Richmond Habitat's recent introduction of a community land trust, where the nonprofit will own land and sell the houses on the land to clients, thereby cutting costs for homeowners.

Richmond Habitat has expanded from the city of Richmond to Amelia, Charles City, Chesterfield, Henrico and New Kent counties. Where it once built about 16 homes a year, it now has 158 lots under development and 51 homes in the works for new and renovation construction.

The budget has grown under LaRiviere's leadership from \$2.3 million to \$10 million a year.

"If you have a good vision, a good product and you are a good leader, you can get people to follow you," Nea said. "Leisha is good at twisting arms. You can't say 'no.' It's so much fun working with her. It's all very challenging, very new and different."

LaRiviere, 43, manages a staff of 25.

"I love my job; I love working with people who want to work hard to improve themselves," she said.

"We thank our families every day for their willingness to build a better community and a stronger family. . . . For every strong family that partners in the program, we can build one more house, dozens more families can be served and hundreds of volunteers will be inspired."

...

LaRiviere skipped her 1990 graduation at the University of Montevallo in Alabama to accept a training position at Pfizer pharmaceuticals in New York.

She met her husband, Jan, a Dutch American -- "married for 19 glorious years" -- while working for Pfizer in sales in Baton Rouge, La.

"My favorite thing about him is he loves to hike and camp with our son J.C.," she said. "I need to plug in my electric hair curlers."

Their identical twin daughters, now 17, were born in Baton Rouge. The girls spent 21 days in intensive care. Two weeks later, the family moved to the Netherlands, where Jan, a chemical engineer, accepted a job as a plant manager.

LaRiviere learned to speak, read and write Dutch on a limited basis, "enough to live there happily." Three years later, they moved to Fayetteville, N.C.

"I did a lot of volunteer work. That was my outlet," she said.

"Whether you live in Baton Rouge, Ooltgensplaat [in the Netherlands], Fayetteville or Richmond, it's about finding your place in the community. We have never been in a place we haven't loved."

The LaRivieres arrived in Richmond, expecting to be here two to three years as they had elsewhere. They have been here 13 years.

The couple had three days to find a house and bought in Chesterfield County because of the schools there.

The twins are co-captains of the forensics team at Midlothian High School. Stacey is president of the International Baccalaureate Key Club; Khaki is immediate past president.

All three children play string instruments. J.C., 14, is working toward Eagle Scout, the highest rank in the Boy Scouts of America.

Stacey won the Comcast Leaders and Achievers award. Khaki won the Prudential Spirit of the Community Award. Together, they developed Lead-Up, a leadership certificate program at Midlothian High School.

"I am so proud of them," their mother said.

"While you are making a path for yourself that you feel good about, you create a path you can share with others," she said. "That expresses what we believe in."

As her children find their way, LaRiviere serves as president of the International Baccalaureate Parents Council at the high school.

"She is one of the most positive people I have ever met," said Marcus J. Newsome, superintendent of Chesterfield County Public Schools. "She has encouragement for everyone."

Newsome said he has thoroughly enjoyed working with the girls. "They are a little bit more low-key than their mother, but they are very positive."

Their leadership program is a masterpiece that can be replicated at any school, Newsome said.

They developed the program not because of any course work or assignment but because of their desire to engage in service to the school, Newsome said. "That is one of the values they have learned from their mother, to go beyond the expectations of others, to be consistent, respectful and responsible with honesty and accountability."

...

Before becoming president and CEO, LaRiviere served on the Habitat board of directors and chaired the first grass-roots, women-built home for the chapter.

She helped raise \$50,000 and brought together 480 people through the Junior Federated Women's Club and the Junior League of Richmond.

"Our theme was heart and home. Where it all starts is a healthy home and a strong heart," LaRiviere said. "Habitat for Humanity is all about heart and home."

Contact Carol Hazard at (804) 775-8023 or chazard@timesdispatch.com.