

Observer-Tribune

- By MARK KITCHIN Staff Writer
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WASHINGTON TWP. - The house at 3 Settlers Ridge Court doesn't look all that much different than others in the area, but to the family about to occupy it, it is very special indeed.

The new home is the first Morris Habitat for Humanity has built in the township. It was dedicated on Thursday, Jan 25.



Mayor Matt Murello, Morris Habitat for Humanity Chief Executive Officer Liz DeCoursey, and about 20 people including volunteers who worked on the house joined homeowner Syreeta – she asked her last name not be used – for the celebration.

“I came up here and I saw nothing,” she said of her first trip to the property. “I saw the woods. I thought, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’. Then I came up here (again) and stood in the foundation, and then I saw the basement.



“When I stood that day in the basement, that is when it hit me a little bit. I thought maybe this will be your home. It is happening.”

Syreeta will be moving with three of her four children from a three-bedroom ground floor apartment in Watchung sometime next month. For the past 15 years, she has been employed as a social worker for 150 adult clients with mental health issues.

She also leads a group therapy session and runs client programs on mental health.

She had to work for the opportunity to live in a house of her own, but received her first chance the same way others gain houses through Habitat for Humanity – by chance.

“It’s through a random selection,” DeCoursey said. “We go out and have to solicit and let people know about the house in three or four counties. People have to apply to qualify. They have to meet the income eligibility for low and moderate homes in the state and they have to qualify for the number of people per bedroom.

“They also have to be credit worthy. There is a loan. They pay taxes. At the end, all the eligible applicants go into a random selection or a lottery.”

DeCoursey said that four bedroom homes, even in market rental rates, are hard to come by and in an affordable setting they are very rare. So Morris Habitat has been trying to build more four bedroom homes if they can. Habitat homes tend to be more multi-family and condominiums, which allow for affordable ownership.

This particular property didn’t come into Morris Habitat’s attention until 14 years ago.

“This home started back in 2010 when Lakeland Bank asked us if we wanted a donation of the lot,” DeCoursey said. “We did of course. We didn’t start in earnest planning the construction until five years ago.”



Building

The property itself posed a series of challenges, since it is on a five-acre lot in which more than four acres might be considered hillside. The property is physically located in Washington Township but its postal address is listed as Port Murray. Not much further up the hill in the back is the property line for Tewksbury in Hunterdon County

“Most of the property is under a conservation easement,” said Chief Construction Officer Doug Wright. “If it’s not buildable, it can’t be used. We have a steep grade. Some of the sitework challenges were there. It’s on a well. It is on a septic. There was a lot of infrastructure that had to go up the hill and get the well and septic in.”

It also necessitated the construction of a switchback type of paved driveway through its front yard and a two car garage. Because there’s not enough room for a shed on the property, half the garage will have to be used as storage for snow blowers and lawn mowers and other equipment.

The position of the house wasn’t steep enough to keep equipment trucks from traveling up to work in the property, but the remote location made it difficult to find volunteers to help.

“A lot of our corporations are more toward the eastern part of Morris County, a lot of our volunteers as well,” Wright said. “This site, we only had volunteers for three days a week. It was a little longer than our (usual) single family builds.”

The wet weather patterns this past year didn’t help either.

“If you look at the days that it rained it was definitely disproportionately Saturdays and Mondays,” Wright said.

“Monday, Fridays and Saturday were the days we were trying to get the volunteers here. It rained practically every Saturday and Monday.”

The new house includes, a kitchen, living room, bathroom, dining room, laundry room and a full basement. The first floor is also handicap accessible. If a disabled individual was to live there, one of rooms could be converted to a bedroom. The second floor includes the four bedrooms and a full bath. Because much of the work is done by volunteers, it’s construction is simple.

“A lot of the work force is a lay workforce,” architect Seth Leeb said. “We have to design with that in mind. No really large beams. Nothing too complicated.”

The house is electric and built to the most efficient standards that benefits a Habitat for Humanity owner.

Wright said. "It is 30 percent more energy efficient than an Energy Star home," Wright said. "It uses less than half the energy of a typical brand new home.

"That means our home owners utility bills are going to be very low. It helps with the environment. We have a low carbon footprint. Habitat always builds to at least Energy Star (standards) to save our home owners money and be easier on the environment."

Among those working on the house for the last 18 months was Syreeta herself. When asked if she thought she was capable of building a house by herself, she replied, "Oh. Yes."

Wright could vouch for the effort she put in.

"Syreeta had to do 400 hours of sweat equity on the home," Wright said. "It's eight hours a day every Saturday for nine months. She did whatever the task was for the day."

Washington Township's Murello also had a hand in some of the early work done to prepare the new house.

"My son (Nick) and I were out building the studs for this close to two to three years ago, when they were putting this together at the habitat facility on Route 10," Murello said. "A lot of these walls we actually helped build."

Murello wasn't sure but Habitat for Humanities officials said that the new house would count as a unit in the township's low income housing requirements. Murello said that other organizations, like Homeless Solutions, have built houses in Washington Township in the past but this one was a little different.

"What is unique about this one is it is a single family in a single family home," Murello said. "Many times these projects are trying to do a multi-family which Washington Township doesn't have a lot

of space. Anytime we have an opportunity to take a property and get someone in that is going to contribute, and be appreciative, and be part of our community, I'm all for it."

Future



Once the keys are handed over, Habitat for Humanity is finished in its responsibilities to the home owner, but they will provide services if asked.

"Once we sell it we are done," Wright said. "They (homeowners) are welcome to call us for assistance when they need advice. When they close on the house, it is a fee simple house. Legally it is theirs. We sometimes hold the mortgages. Most of the time we are working with our partner banks. Banks often offer special rates to keep the mortgages affordable.

"We make sure that that family is going to have a payment that is affordable for them. They do have to pay their mortgage. They do have to pay their taxes. They pay their insurance just like everybody else. The price on the house was subsidized so it was affordable for them based on their income."

And while building their home is done, the ending is now a new beginning for Syreeta and her family with a new adventure in a new place.

"This has been a journey for me," Syreeta said. "A journey for my family. I'm thankful for all the volunteers. It takes a village and I thank you all for being my village."