

Project Build helps families buy their own home

BY ANDREA HILL
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One Okanagan community is thriving thanks to a private sector grant program that's moving local families into the housing market.

Last summer, John Brennan and his family were living in a small Kelowna townhouse. He and his wife wanted to move their small children to a larger home but the young couple couldn't afford a down payment on a house.

"There wasn't a lot of space in the townhouse for us," Brennan said. "The older (the kids) were getting, the smaller it was getting."

Brennan and his wife had trouble finding work after graduating and so went back to school for more specialized education.

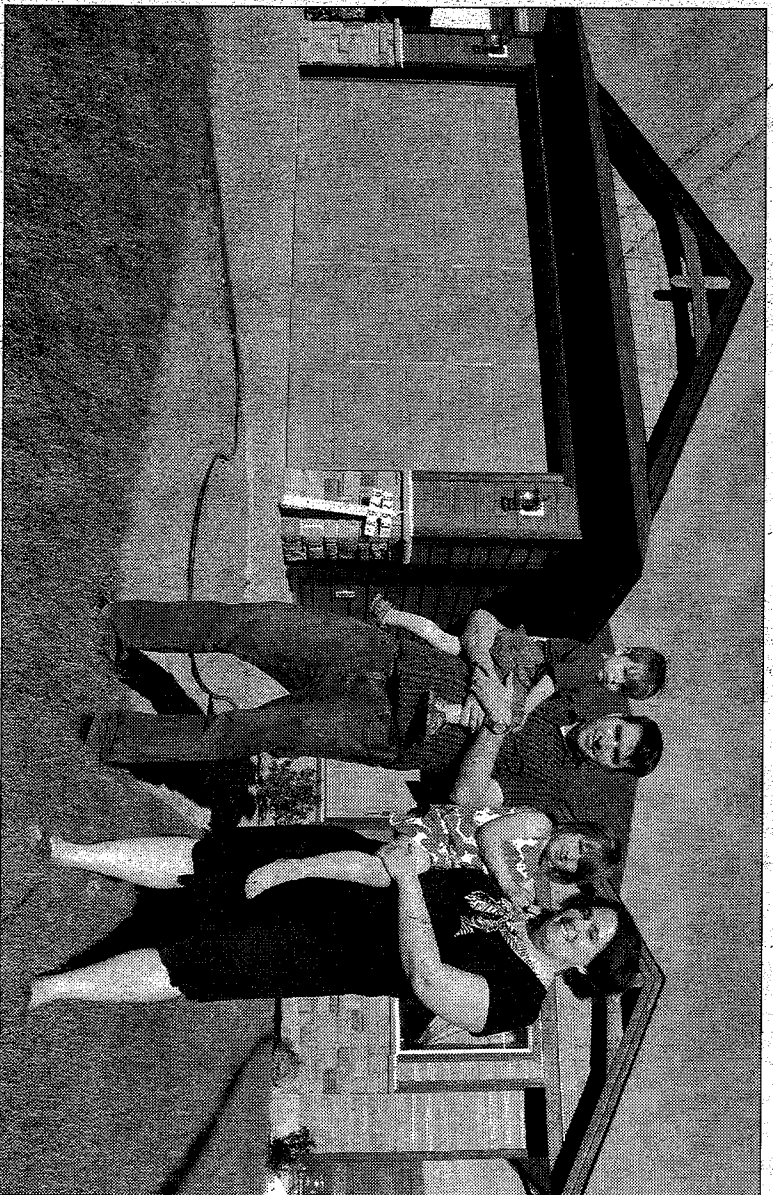
The decision left them financially unable to buy a home in an expensive housing market.

But then in October the Brennan family moved into a spacious new three-bedroom house in Sageglenn. "It's nice to have the kids into a place where they can run around and they have a lot of space," Brennan said.

The Brennan family was the recipient of a \$45,000 down payment grant. The grants are given out by the Project Build Society, a non-profit organization that aims to help 40 Okanagan families get into the housing market. It does this by having realtors, builders and other trades people commit part of their earnings toward down payments on the houses they build.

The society began construction on its first house in November 2009. Since then, 23 families, including the Brennans, have moved into new houses. Six more families will move in by August.

Project Build was born in 2007



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John and Tessa Brennan are pictured with their children Matthew, 2, and Madeline, 4, outside of their home.

when a group of volunteers came together to construct a house for charity.

"At the time we thought of the idea, most developers, most trades in the Valley were doing very, very well," said Derek Threthewey, the developer who launched the project.

"It was kind of our way of giving back to the community." Threthewey donated a lot in Winfield and recruited dozens of volunteers to build, furnish and sell the house. When the three-bedroom house sold in 2008, it netted \$590,000 for the Central Okanagan Foundation, which distributes funds to charities throughout the Okanagan.

But then the economic landscape changed. The real estate market

slumped — builders weren't building and people weren't buying.

Gino Dal Ponte, partner with MacDonald Realty Kelowna and a volunteer with Project Build, decided something needed to be done.

"One morning, I woke up and said to myself 'what can we do now that we can still be charitable and at the same time create some employment?'" Dal Ponte recalled.

Dal Ponte set in place the groundwork for what has now become the Project Build Society. People involved with building a house take less pay so new homeowners can be given a down payment. This helps people who are able and willing buyers, but who don't have the money for a down payment, Dal Ponte said.

Individuals or families selected to receive the down payments are chosen based on need and income. People applying for the grants must have a minimum combined household income of \$75,000 per year and be able to make mortgage payments on their new homes, which are valued at more than \$350,000.

The decision to help people in this income bracket has opened the project up to some ridicule. Dal Ponte said, "People ask why aren't we helping those who make \$10,000 a year?" Dal Ponte said. "Well, we can't help everybody, but at least we're helping somebody."

He said the middle-class people moving into Sageglenn are taxpayers who support the less fortunate

and also need all the help they can get.

Rob Anderson, builder for Project Build and president for Build-Rite Homes, said he believes the middle-class is an important segment of the population to help.

"Even though they all qualify for the financing to carry a mortgage, they would otherwise be unable to buy a brand new home especially in this area where the price of housing is fairly considerable," Anderson said.

Anderson has been involved with Project Build since 2007 when he helped build the home for the Central Okanagan Foundation. He said the program helps not only new homeowners, but also those people involved in building the houses.

"It's a great economic multiplier for all the spinoff opportunities that come from it," Anderson said. "It's just been a win-win situation for everyone."

Even though workers are giving up a portion of their earnings to build and sell the houses, they are given an employment opportunity they might not otherwise have.

Construction on the remaining 14 lots in Sageglenn will begin later this year. Leanne Hammond Komori, executive director for the Central Okanagan Foundation and one of the people involved in selecting families to receive grants, said the foundation has already received 40 applications for these lots and families are still invited to apply.

"We're looking for people who are what I would characterize as on the cusp of success," Hammond Komori said. "They're families or individuals who have not been able to save a down payment but that have all the means to be successful in life."