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Cover story: Builders construct community goodwill

By Michele Lerner SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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When Frank Chiamonte, vice president of Chiamonte Construction Co. in the District, heard about the needs of the Children of Mine Youth Center, he immediately picked the nonprofit organization as his company's charity of choice.

Children of Mine, founded by Hannah Hawkins in the early 1980s, offers a safe haven, homework help and food for about 70 children each day in one of the poorest areas of the District.

"Mrs. Hawkins basically makes her organization work with very little money, so we stepped in to repair the building so they have heat, working windows, a functioning bathroom, a working kitchen and fresh paint," Mr. Chiamonte said. "We painted and plastered the space the kids use for homework and put in new doors and windows. She was paying \$3,000 a month for her heating bill, so we're hoping this helps lower her expenses."

Chiamonte Construction Co., like many builders in the Washington area, provides countless hours of free labor, discounted or free building materials, construction expertise and cash to help its community. Some builders work with foundations affiliated with the local builders associations, while others choose to help local groups on an individual basis.

HomeAid Northern Virginia recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, said Christy Eaton, the group's executive director.

"Our focus is to build and renovate transitional housing and shelters for homeless families in our area," Ms. Eaton said. "We've worked on 65 projects over the past 10 years valued at about \$10,000,000. Close to half of that value has been donated by local builders and their subcontractors."

Doug Smith, president of Miller & Smith, received the Presidents' Award for his exceptional dedication to the goal of ending homelessness and his service to HomeAid Northern Virginia.

"We've supported HomeAid because we really believe the organization capitalizes on what builders can do to help their community," Mr. Smith said. "HomeAid leverages the expertise of contractors and their suppliers to save money for the nonprofit groups, who can then spend the

donations they receive on improving their services or buying additional properties for shelters and transitional housing."

Mr. Smith said Miller & Smith's employees, suppliers and subcontractors have donated countless hours of work on 10 HomeAid projects over the past decade.

"So many of our contractors and employees say they will donate labor and time, and then the amount always grows," Mr. Smith said. "There are just a lot of great people willing to get involved. We always have at least one day toward the end of each project when our entire staff works together on the home, putting on the finishing touches, and then often they will donate gift cards and food to the shelter."

K. Hovnanian Homes is the sponsor of a \$1.2 million expansion of the Serve Family Care Shelter in Manassas, Va., which will increase the shelter's capacity from 60 beds to 92 beds.

"As a builder, we are capitalizing on the resources of our trade partners, suppliers and subcontractors, who donate free time and materials or reduce their prices for the HomeAid projects," said Chris Payne, group director of purchasing for K. Hovnanian Homes. "While HomeAid is usually our biggest project each year, we also participate in Christmas in April projects from time to time to work on smaller projects that help our community."

The Craftmark Group, parent company of Craftmark Homes and Craftstar Homes, supports Habitat for Humanity of Montgomery County.

"Ken Malm, president of the Craftmark Group, is on our board and has been an enormous help by giving us substantial financial donations, donating house plans and building lots for Habitat homes and helping us with issues that come up during the process of developing land," said John Paukstis, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Montgomery County, Maryland, Inc. "He's also introduced us to professionals in the building industry who have saved us money by donating time and expertise."

Many local builders support Habitat's work by providing materials, money and skilled leaders with building experience who work with volunteers to build homes for needy families.

Since 1984, the Home Builders Care Foundation, the charitable organization associated with the Maryland-National Capital Building Industry Association (MNCBIA), has leveraged the expertise of MNCBIA members to build and improve shelters in suburban Maryland and the District.

"Our projects run the gamut from small things like building a ramp for a home for a Christmas in April project to building a \$2,000,000 shelter for 135 men in Montgomery County," said Patti Kane, director of the Home Builders Care Foundation. "We do everything we can to help our community, whether it is a nonprofit needing a little renovation help on an emergency shelter or work [that] needs to be done on a permanent home for a family in need. We do food drives and toy collections. Our website and our office provide as much assistance as we can to help people find shelter and aid."

The Maryland Community Builders Foundation, founded in 1999, is the charitable arm of the Home Builders Association of Maryland

(HBAM).

"Our main objective is to keep people warm, safe and dry, so we do a lot of small fixes throughout the year," said Christopher Rachuba, chairman of the Maryland Community Builders Foundation. "We put in a ramp at the home of an injured veteran, put in a new kitchen for a homeless shelter and then last year we were the project manager for an 'Extreme Makeover' project in Baltimore. We like the idea of helping more people by doing a lot of smaller projects instead of one big one."

Throughout the year, Mr. Rachuba said, the 1,100 HBAM members participate in fundraisers. Each company is asked to donate a minimum of \$500 annually in cash or goods and services.

Case Design/Remodeling participates in numerous charitable activities throughout the year, including acting as general contractor for a Homes for Our Troops project in Frederick, Md., earlier this year.

"We were the contractors and had about 100 to 150 people, including a lot of our subcontractors, build a home for a Marine who had lost an arm and a leg in Afghanistan," said Bruce Case, president of Case Design/Remodeling. "Eighty percent of the materials for that home were donated by companies we work with."

Case Design/Remodeling has renovated kitchens in several transitional housing locations for Homestretch, a Falls Church-based organization that helps homeless families.

"Supporting nonprofits is about giving back to our community, but it also internally sets the culture of our company," Mr. Case said. "We try to never say no to anything an employee or a past client asks us to do. We also focus on homelessness, children and veterans in our projects."

While builders naturally are drawn to projects involving housing, many also support other local nonprofits that need funds. Case Design/Remodeling and multiple other builders and interior designers work on the DC Design House each year, which raises money for Children's National Medical Center.

Support for Children's National Medical Center is also the mission chosen by Barbara Ghadban, vice president of NVP Inc., for her company, which holds an annual golf tournament as a fundraiser.

"We've raised over \$200,000 for Children's over the past eight years," said Robie Lynn Morrison, sales and marketing manager for NVP. "Our entire staff gets involved, and this year we were able to raise \$27,000 in one day."

Libby Lumia, operations manager of Steuart-Kret Homes in La Plata, Md., said her company has given at least \$25,000 in donations over the past 30 years to local groups that need assistance.

"We're a family-run business, so we choose a different small group each year to donate money to," Ms. Lumia said. "This year we are supporting the Samaritan's Purse project called Operation Christmas Child to send basic supplies to children all over the world. We've also

supported a local hospice care organization, and we sponsor a local baseball team every year."

EYA created EYA Cares to work with nonprofits and local schools in the communities where the company builds homes.

"Our goal is to contribute through community-service projects, so we do at least three community-service days per year that our entire company participates in," said Aakash Thakkar, senior vice president for acquisitions and development for EYA.

"We did an Anacostia River cleanup day last spring, which ties into our work on storm-water treatment and is located near several of our developments," he said.

Mr. Thakkar said some of the other EYA projects this year included a community improvement day for Marvin Gaye Park in the District's Ward 8, in which employees helped build a park and made financial contributions. The company provides gifts, food and a party location for children who live in public housing in Alexandria as part of its support of the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority. In addition, EYA has sponsored toy and food collections for BEST Kids, a Capitol Hill mentoring program and for HSC Pediatric Center in Brookland.

Linda Ellington, vice president of sales and marketing for Mitchell & Best Homes, said, "We're a family company, and so we try to support as many charities as we can all year long. We try to seek out things we can do locally, where we can have an impact on our community. Last year, we worked with a disabled student from [Howard County, Md.'s] Reservoir High School Work Study Program, teaching him basic skills that can help him find future employment."

Other nonprofits supported by Mitchell & Best and its staff include Montgomery General Hospital, Hospice Caring and a shelter for the homeless.

As Ms. Ellington put it - and most builders likely would agree - "If we are asked, we help anyone to the best of our ability."

The dedication of builders to their community has remained unchanged even in the face of the economic downturn.

"A decade or so ago, Case Cares used to be about small things like blood drives, but over the past two or three years, we've taken it to another level," Mr. Case said. "It's almost counterintuitive since the building community has been hit hard, but we realize that not only is the need greater right now, but we have to have something we can rally around, that makes us remember we all have heart and soul."