

NATIONAL POST

Thursday, November 20, 2008

Home builders give back to their communities

Presented by



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Published: Thursday, November 20, 2008



National Post

For Hugh Heron of Heathwood Homes, it all began six years ago when his business partner and friend, Michael Salem, passed away while playing golf in Muskoka. Mr. Heron doesn't know whether anything could have been done to help Mr. Salem, but he was motivated to do something in his friend's name, something that could help other people in a similar situation. So the Mikey Network was born.

The idea behind the Mikey Network is to put defibrillators in as many public places as possible. A defibrillator - an electronic device that delivers an electric shock to the heart to return it to its normal rhythm - won't help a heart patient all the time, but it has proven to be useful the sooner it's used after an attack. Having one handy might help until paramedics arrive.

That's been the goal of Mr. Heron and his team. Since this past spring, the Mikey Network had committed over 400 units and raised just over

\$1-million for the cause. Because of the program, Mr. Heron says, people's lives have been saved - and the developer couldn't be more proud.

"At the beginning, I started off doing something for Michael Salem because [he was my] partner," he says. "Then the whole giving takes over when you meet people who have been saved."

Mr. Heron isn't the only developer who's made charity part of the corporate mandate. While developers are better known for building their communities, some are giving back to the community in a different way altogether: through their time and their pocketbooks. "Go to the boards of directors for any hospital or charity and nine times out of 10, you'll find people in the building industry," Mr. Heron says. "They've all got big hearts."

Take Aspen Ridge. Rather than committing to a single cause, the developer prefers to get involved with charities specific to the communities in which it builds. With several low-rise projects in York Region - including ongoing sites such as Upper Cornell in Markham and Macleod's Landing in Richmond Hill - the developer has been giving to the local York Central Hospital for the past six years (\$100 for every

one of its homes sold in York Region is donated to the cause). The amount has topped \$223,000. With high-rises such as Vü and 77 Charles West, Aspen Ridge has found a Toronto-based charity to partner with - the Fred Victor Mission is the beneficiary of \$100 per suite sold at all of Aspen Ridge's Toronto projects. It was chosen for its proximity to the developer's original Toronto site, Vü. "This is a new partnership," says Christene de Gasperis of Aspen Ridge. "It's a popular charity among the community, so it was a natural fit."

The Daniels Corp. is another developer that gives back to the community.

Providing shelter was a natural fit for the developer, which is why it became involved with Habitat for Humanity, which builds affordable housing. Two years ago, Daniels donated a \$700,000 piece of land in Etobicoke to the organization, the largest piece of land the Canadian branch has ever received from a private company.

Daniels is also involved with Second Harvest - sponsoring its annual fundraising initiative, Toronto Taste, for the past 13 years - as well as with Eva's Initiatives, which provides services for homeless youth, and the Regent Park School of Music, another youth-oriented program. "There's a myriad of really great organizations out there," says Daniels vice-president Niall Haggart. "We've chosen to adopt a limited number, so we can make a potential difference, as opposed to trying to be everything to everybody."

The inspiration to give can emerge from corporate philosophy, as with Daniels, or it can come from a more personal encounter, as was the case with Julie Di Lorenzo, co-president of Diamante Development Corp. Always interested in the environment, she recently donated \$500,000 to the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Her inspiration: a butterfly that landed on her head one afternoon in Toronto. "Here I am on Bay Street, the traffic's going fast, and here is this poor, fragile, gorgeous thing," she says. "It struck me."

When Diamante made its donation, she asked that the money go to something related to butterflies. As a result, it was used to preserve a piece of land on Pelee Island that's integral to butterfly migration, property now named the Florian Diamante Nature Preserve, after Diamante's Yorkville project, the Florian. "The residents will know forever that in some way they're custodians of a very, very important piece of natural habitat," says Ms. Di Lorenzo.

Fred Losani and Steve Stipsits - of Losani Homes and Branthaven Homes - have also gotten personal with their charitable involvement. Not many people can boast of a trek to the North Pole, but both builders did just that in 2006, to raise \$500,000 for children's charities in Hamilton and its surrounding areas, where both are based. This year, they're travelling to the South Pole - a colder, more dangerous expedition. Like last time, the developers paid for all their own equipment and travel - any donations went straight to charity, with another \$500,000 goal set. The expedition is scheduled for the beginning of December. "I don't think we would have gotten the team together again if that charitable component hadn't existed," Mr. Losani says, two weeks before his departure. "We found that it was one of the most gratifying components."

