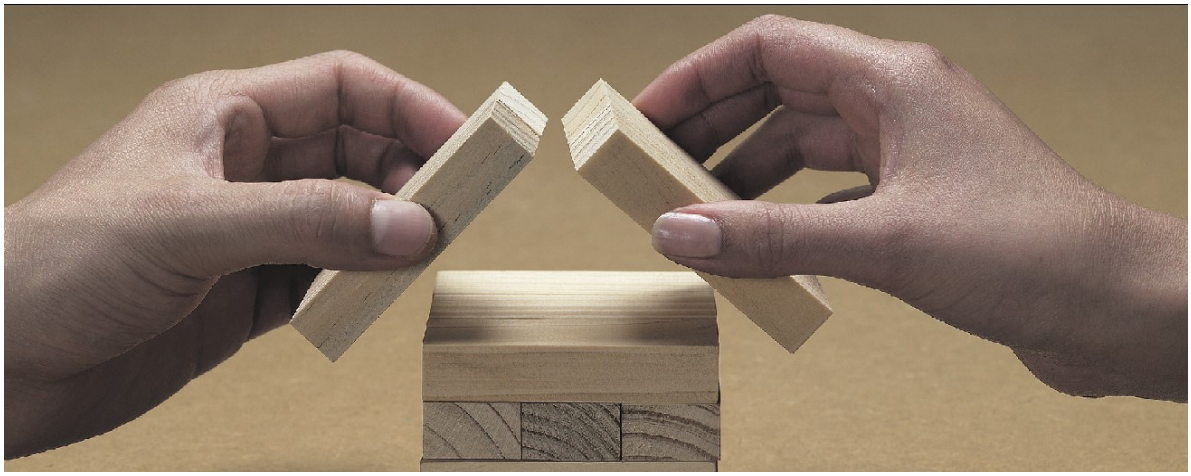


National Housing Day

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Innovative housing more than just lumber and nails

by Tom Eremondi of SP Creative Features

Innovative housing can be more than just a roof over head.

That's the message Judy-Lynn Archer, president of the Edmonton-based Women Building Futures (WBF), will bring to Saskatoon this morning. She's speaking at a private function sponsored by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, the City of Saskatoon and Saskatoon Housing Initiatives Partnership, to mark National Housing Day.

Across the country today, groups will hold various events to highlight affordable housing initiatives that can make difference in people's lives. Archer says Women Building Futures was the inspiration of "a group of women who were social workers and were tired of seeing the number of women living in poverty."

This group thought a solution would be to get more women into construction and trades. "It was a great idea and they formed a society called Women Building Futures but, because they were all working full-time, they weren't able to follow up too much."

Archer came to the organization in 2003. "I thought their goal was really worthy and especially so because I could see then the skill shortage that was coming, just because of the demographics."

She also sympathized because she grew up in a single-parent home and "worked in the field for a long time. I know women can do this work."

Archer's efforts saw Women Building Futures become an active training ground for women, providing education in several trades including welding, carpentry, sheet metal, electrical, fitting, and millwright.

About five years ago, Women Building Futures expanded by acquiring an old warehouse in Edmonton that could be used as their training facility but also more, she reports. "While training has



The Women Building Futures facility in Edmonton provides trades training and social housing.

always been the goal, when I started I noticed how housing was an issue for so many women, especially those who are working poor. They can't quit their jobs to go to school because they couldn't pay their rent. I knew this was a challenge for many women in the WBF program."

In addition to being a trades and training centre, the Edmonton facility is also home to 42 fully furnished units, 18 of which are marked for women with children. "A number are reserved for our students," Archer says, "but we have women in our housing who are enrolled in other training facilities nearby."

"These are all women who are forging ahead and doing training, so having housing such as this makes it even more doable for them. Everything they need is provided – from coffee pots to sheets and furniture. All they have to bring is themselves."

Funding for the facility came from all levels of government and also from industry.

Archer estimates that 550 women have taken the training and improved their situations. "There was a study conducted that showed how WBF students on average saw their income triple, benefits and assets increase, and debt decrease. The same study saw that for

every dollar invested in a WBF student, there was a \$6 return. That shows what can happen when the right people are given the right support.

"This facility is the first of its kind in Canada but I really believe in the model," Archer adds, noting Saskatchewan would be an ideal place for such a facility.

"Saskatchewan has every reason in the world to be looking at women as a labour supply. I've seen stats from the 2006 census that show 150,000 women living and working poor in Saskatchewan. If we could attract say just two per cent of those, the construction industry would have immediate access to 3,000 workers. Move that up by just one per cent and it's access to 4,500 workers.

"That's a lot of people," Archer continues. "People who can do this work, as we've proven in Alberta by providing a combination of training and social housing."

She says the right combination of government, non-profit and private support is also key. "It's just a matter of the right people coming together and all pulling in the same direction to make it happen."