



Bienestar draws talents from many for successful nonprofit

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Where do I want to go from here, Robin Smith asked herself.

After working as a paralegal and raising two boys, she was ready for a new challenge. One day her father called and asked "How would you like to do what I do?"

W. Merle Smith Jr. had built approximately 2,500 affordable housing units on the East Coast. He also recycled before it was commonly done and once commuted to work by bicycle for a year, even in snow and ice, just to show it could be done. This was a go-to guy for advice on how to make a difference, and his counsel went like this: Go find a nonprofit, go find some land zoned in the right way and find out housing and urban development deadlines.

Smith spent nine years building residences with her father for seniors and the handicapped.

She then called Bob Majhor with Washington County Council on Aging Inc. and asked him, "Would you like to build more senior housing?"

Even then, 12 years ago, land was very expensive, so Smith perfected the art of using every square foot of land to its best advantage, becoming the undisputed "Queen of Density" - a title she relishes.

Smith is now housing director of Bienestar - formerly Housing Development Corporation - at 220 SE 12th Ave. in Hillsboro. Working with Seabold Construction Inc. she has helped build and totally remodel functional community housing in Hillsboro and Scappoose. SOLV, local nurseries and the community's residents helped landscape the Hillsboro properties to make them even more attractive.

With the addition of Sunset Gardens and Sierra West, both in Hillsboro, and Willow Park, in Forest Grove, Bienestar opened housing units to low income families. (Family income must be below 50 percent of area median income.)

Karen Shawcross, executive director of Bienestar since September 2007, has worked hard to reevaluate the group's goals and has set up core strategies. She states, "We believe that housing is about people, not buildings. Bienestar builds more than affordable housing; we build hope because our communities allow people to thrive and achieve their potential."

Bienestar has been the recipient of several generous grants since Shawcross took over as executive director. The money is being used to fund the Promotores program, computer classes, a new Financial Literacy Program, science, reading, art classes and other resident services.

She is enthusiastic about the improvements that have been made in the Hillsboro area near Sunset Gardens and Sierra West and praises the combined work of Princeton Property Management and the

Hillsboro Police Department.

Gracie Garcia, another important team member, is a native Texan and program services manager at Bienestar. She is passionate about her job and coordinates Promotores, an outreach program that provides peer outreach in the areas of health care, education, employment and housing.

She has taught financial literacy classes through Promotores the past two years.

Shawcross says, "Last November we conducted a door-to-door survey of the residents of our 10 properties, and 91 percent of them identified information about money management as a critical need. We have designed a new financial literacy program model that will take people through three years of learning from the basics of budgeting and banking into homeownership and micro enterprise. A key component of the program will be an Individual Development Account - a matched savings account that will help our residents build assets."

Maria Moreno, Bienestar program coordinator, will begin the new program this fall.

A public celebration from 4-6 p.m. Thursday, July 24, at Sunset Gardens, 951 SE 13th Ave. in Hillsboro, will mark the re-opening of the affordable housing properties with a ribbon-cutting event and comments by Mayor Tom Hughes.

Guests may tour apartments, the community room and computer lab, and enjoy homemade Mexican hors d'oeuvres and live mariachi music. This event will also mark Bienestar as the new name for Housing Development Corporation, a 27-year-old nonprofit.

Photo outline:

Karen Shawcross, executive director (left), is shown with Gracie Garcia, program services manager, and Robin Smith, housing director (right), as they plan for Bienestar's ribbon cutting on July 24.

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