

Building Works! Tackles Small Jobs

By Jack Jensen

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompkins.org.

How many times have we heard complaints about un-handly handymen, or fix-it folks who broke more than they repaired? They're usually uninsured, and seemingly don't care about their reputations. Wouldn't it be great if there was a construction company that did great work on small jobs, with qualified workers, for a very reasonable price?

Wouldn't it be even better if they were green-oriented builders who could give the best and latest advice on energy conservation and green products and practices? And wouldn't it be something if the profits went to supporting a non-profit that worked on important issues?

Well, it's not too good to be true. Community Building Works! Inc. (CBW) is a four-year-old non-profit whose mission is to build green affordable housing locally and internationally. Since forming, CBW has won numerous awards, either doing house recycling projects or building new super insulated homes. CBW breaks ground on a model solar-powered, super insulated home at the green Farm Pond Circle Residential Reforestation Community in Lansing in June.

Even in the midst of the recession, and without advertising, while they were between jobs building new homes, people from all walks of life asked if the organization could do small jobs, ranging from kitchens, and bathrooms to repainting and refinishing. CBW took on these jobs, and discovered a demand for a contractor who is reliable, capable, knowledgeable and honest.

The fact that the so-called "profit" on these jobs went to support CBW's mission-related work was icing on the cake for clients. CBW has spun off a new crew specializing in smaller projects, called the "2Good2BeTru Crew," based on a note left on her new countertops by a satisfied (and repeat) customer.

The crew includes Gideon Stone, an experienced carpenter and graduate of Cornell's College of Architecture, and Nate Litwin, a former lawyer turned carpenter, who handle the bulk of the on-site

work, along with CBW's usual sub-contractors for plumbing and electrical specializations. Jensen notes that CBW does not use volunteers on 2Good2BeTru Crew projects.

The trouble-shooting, design, estimation and supervision are done by CBW director Jack Jensen, who has 39 years experience as a union carpenter, an architect, a designer/builder and a developer. He is a national consultant, trainer and curriculum developer on construction, development, and green building for governmental organizations and non-profits. He also designs and builds the new CBW homes projects, using volunteers on those projects.

"It seems that every job we do, our customers tell us horror stories of some other contractor they've hired. We're not above making mistakes, but as a community-based organization, our biggest priority is our reputation," Stone says.

All crew members are long-time members of the Ithaca Green Building Alliance; Stone was instrumental in Cornell's 2008 Solar Decathlon entry, and Jensen built his first solar-powered home in 1978. All of CBW's homes are super-insulated, solar-powered, and use the greenest building materials possible, and are sold to families earning less than 80 percent of the area median income.

"At the end of the day, you're not only helping the environment and the local affordable housing problem, but you're also making an effort towards international peace," Jensen says. "We're looking to establish a private sector model which creates affordable housing internationally and locally without using any taxpayer dollars. Like the 'Newman's Own' concept, if it tastes the same or better, and the profits go to a worthy cause, why not? The key is making sure the product is both price-competitive and of the highest possible quality."

Three CBW workers went to Pucara, Ecuador this April to help build a home in for a needy villager, partially funded by proceeds from the 2Good2BeTru Crew's efforts; a similar trip is planned when the first Farm Pond Circle home is sold.

To volunteer on CBW projects, or for more information, visit www.communitybuildingworks.org.

Jack Jensen is executive director of Community Building Works! Inc.