

Agency steps up to help RI family get a home

Steve Trainor | Posted: Monday, May 23, 2011 9:48 pm

Life is a lot better these days for Gloria Sonnier and her three children.

A year ago, they were living in an apartment surrounded by neighbors she mostly didn't know, passers-by she didn't want to know and in a neighborhood with a lot of loud, argumentative street activity.

"It's hard to find reasonable rent for four people in a decent area on one income," she said. "I lived in one of those blocks that was pretty 'live.'"

Since November, though, she and her children have lived in the Douglas Park area of Rock Island, a "better pocket of people and homes," she believes. "I can watch my kids in the back yard from our home. I feel better about that now. Before, I couldn't see them from the apartment. I had to be on the street with them."

Also, the family doesn't have to pile in the car anymore to drive to a park to play. The kids — James, 17, Joshua, 13, and Jada, 10 — have more freedom to come and go from their home into their yard and beyond.

Sonnier laughs as she tells her story, adding, "And I'm yelling 'close the door!'"

The Sonniers came by this home of their own via Bethany for Children & Families, a licensed Illinois child welfare agency and a licensed child-placing agency for the state of Iowa. It has existed in what is now the Quad-Cities since it was founded in 1899 as the Union Mission.

Bethany's stated mission "is to keep children safe, to strengthen families and to build healthy communities."

Still, one doesn't think of Bethany when it comes to bricks and mortar.

"There are too many people buying up places like this (the Sonniers' new home) and just renting them, (without doing any rehabilitation work), which doesn't help the neighborhood," explained Jenny Hager, the vice president of marketing and development for Bethany.

A property group donated the vacant house to the agency. The group got a tax deduction and Bethany got a home, which really did not fit its mission. First, though, the agency got a mess.

The previous occupants left behind two dogs and six puppies, which had had the run of the abode for months.

But between all of the feces and chewed-up molding, Bethany staffers saw "potential."

Bill Steinhauer, Bethany's CEO, his family and many other Bethany employees and volunteers literally pulled up flooring and bleached the stench away to ready the house for renovation.

Bethany staff then asked some 20 area businesses and contractors to donate or discount supplies and services.

Big Dog Construction did the structural work, Kale Co. dealt with asbestos in the house and put in ductwork, Menards offered discounted flooring and Republic Electric put in a new furnace. Additional help came from Iowa-Illinois Taylor Insulation, John Hubert Carpeting, Mirr Plumbing, P.R. Masonry, Romeo Drywall, Seiffert Lumber, Souk-Up Heating & Air and Steve's Mirror & Glass.

"They were all generous in their giving," Hager said, "and believed in this effort."

She said many of those businesses went above and beyond to get the house ready for sale.

To get the house before someone else did required Sonnier to quickly find some money for the down payment instead of going through a program that would help her qualify. She is presently working with the Rock Island Economic Growth Corporation to not only clean up her credit, but also to keep it good.

As the process moved forward, her banker, Dave Emerick of Blackhawk Bank & Trust, kept her calm, assuring her that roadblocks are typical of the home-buying process.

“Bethany also just stepped up and helped me through the whole thing,” she said. “They were the sellers and they could have said, ‘We’re done,’ but they didn’t. They were reassuring and helpful.”

The agency even came up with some furnishings. Bethany has always collected furniture, home furnishings and a variety of in-kind gifts.

“We’ve never done this (rehabbed and sold a house) before, but the looks on this family’s faces made it very rewarding,” Hager said.

Sonnier’s advice to others in a situations similar to hers is: “Don’t give up.”

“I started 10 years ago trying to be a homeowner,” she said. “The programs are out there. Check them out. Ask questions.”

No one ever told her “no,” but there were delays and she had to take classes to educate herself. But she just kept trying.

“I wouldn’t be a homeowner without them (Bethany),” she admitted.

So now there’s one less home in foreclosure, one less fearful family, one better-maintained home and a neighborhood that is one home — and one family — better.