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THAT'S THE SPIRIT!

BY STEVE BATES

Engaging residents through events, activities and volunteerism turns a collection of homes into a community. Find your formula, and you'll be well on your way to boosting pride and promoting harmony.

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AT FIRST GLANCE, Eastman and Riverwoods Plantation might appear to have little in common. The former is nestled in the wooded hills near Dartmouth College in Grantham, N.H.; the latter is located in sandy Estero, Fla., just a short sail from the Gulf Coast. But each is rich in the kind of spirit that ties neighbor to neighbor in many disparate ways.

They boast an enthusiasm for their communities that makes people proud to live there, provides a firm foundation for property values and makes governing their associations less of a challenge than it might be otherwise.

Developers, managers, association volunteers, residents and real estate agents all across the country strive to build, nurture and promote the harmony and togetherness that turn a collection of homes into a community, but it's not easy. Successful community building takes time and effort, and it has to be based on a shared vision that varies from one association to the next.

"You don't build a sense of community overnight," says Joe Winkler, CMCA, vice president of marketing with Keystone Pacific Property Management in Irvine, Calif.

Community can wither if not nurtured. And according to some, spirit and togetherness are getting harder to maintain in today's divisive world. "It's deteriorating across the nation," observes Rachel Miller, manager of Riverwoods Plantation RV Condominium Association.

But when community-building efforts work, the end result can be highly rewarding, though occasionally difficult to define.

"It's almost a feeling," says Leslie Moses, chief community living officer of Eastman Community Association.

Eastman, which is celebrating its 45th anniversary in 2016, consists of about 1,500 single-family homes and condominiums on about 3,600 acres encompassing three small towns. A lake is the focus of recreational activities during warm months. But at Eastman's spiritual center is a set of core values: collaboration, cooperation, integrity, respect, responsibility, shared commitment and sustainability. Leaders and residents embrace diversity of interests and opinions, foster volunteerism, partner with local governments and work hard to protect the property for future generations.

Having nice amenities, such as a community center and athletic facilities, helps any association build a sense of belonging and pride. Yet a network of dedicated volunteers who share core values is what makes Eastman and many other communities tick, says Moses. Because residents feel so strongly about Eastman, the association usually doesn't have to beg them to get involved. "You'll often see them come forward on their own if they feel passionate about something," she says.

"It's the way the community has always been," says Christie Cecchetti, co-chair of the association's recreation committee and a resident for more than 20 years.

She says having many generations represented in Eastman helps foster spirit, even though that diversity creates a need for a wide offering of programs and amenities. Teenagers run a snack shack during the summer; older residents help raise funds for charity; and families flock to a campout night. All of the efforts were recognized in 2016, when the association was named a MetLife Foundation Best Intergenerational Communities Award winner.

Cecchetti says residents who wish to volunteer even one hour a week—or just help out on a one-time basis—are always welcome. "It's very easy to get involved at Eastman."

BOUND TOGETHER

That's also the case at Riverwoods Plantation, a 55-plus community where 640 manufactured, mobile and motor homes occupy about 60 of the 78 acres. The remaining land includes recreational areas, boat docks and a boat storage area. Civic involvement and volunteering are the two main activities that bind residents to one another and to the association, says Miller.

Many residents attend local government meetings. Recently, when Estero was incorporated as a village with locally elected officials, Riverwoods Plantation residents began speaking out in favor of more bike paths and other amenities that would benefit the wider community.

In addition, the community sponsors an Olympics-styled competition for seniors in the region; proceeds fund a scholarship for a local high school student. Hospitals, blood banks, food banks and a shelter for abused women are among other worthy causes supported by residents. In 2010, Riverwoods Plantation was named a CAI "Humanitarian Community of the Year" for its service to the broader community.

"We really are family," states Miller.

Perhaps Riverwoods Plantation's most unique volunteer program is its Half Bubble team, which supplements the work of the association's maintenance staff and saves the community uncounted thousands of dollars annually. Named after the level and how bubbles help contractors determine whether things lie on the same plane, the group's volunteers gather every Wednesday morning to build or repair vital facilities in the community. They've fixed retaining walls, pilings, piers, walkways and a ramp at the riverfront; installed a geothermal heating system for a pool; dug irrigation lines and installed sprinklers throughout the community; and built a pavilion with sinks, restrooms and a patio for barbecues.

Bob Fumanti has been pitching in for Half Bubble for three years. A former teacher, he looks forward to straining muscles with fellow volunteers each week.

"I don't do tennis. I don't do volleyball," he states. But he knows a thing or two about masonry work and has learned other skills. "These people are very, very committed to what they do."

And the team takes great pride when a project is completed.

Half Bubble was formed in 1987 by nine residents who had significant construction experience. At times, the group has comprised more than 100 volunteers with just about every contractors' trade represented. The volunteers who aren't trained professionals learn on the job. Riverwoods Plantation budgets for materials.

ENGAGING EFFORTS

There are many ways to build and maintain community spirit. Smart association leaders are willing to try new things and abandon programs that don't work.

Jane Dembner joined the nearly 50-year-old Columbia Association—situated between Baltimore, Md., and Washington, D.C.—as its director of planning and community affairs in 2010. Dembner says she was inspired by the community's adherence to its founder's ideals, which include a steadfast commitment to all forms of diversity. That's why she introduced a community-building speaker series.

The program is designed to engender dialogue on thought-provoking topics. Recently, the president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, tackled the topic of racial and economic diversity in the community. Another time, Dembner brought in an expert on the retail industry to explain why it wasn't economically viable to replace a grocery store that closed in the community.