

Construction site

Madison's Habitat for Humanity ReStore builds a national conference

Fixture by fixture. Door by door. Tile by tile and floor by floor. Since opening four years ago, Madison's Habitat for Humanity ReStore has diverted more than 2,200 tons of residential building materials away from landfills and sold them to contractors and the public for remodeling and new construction.

In so doing, the ReStore has generated more than \$1.5 million for Habitat for Humanity of Dane County, the local affiliate of the ecumenical Christian ministry that seeks to build affordable housing and eliminate homelessness. "We've raised enough money to build 12 Habitat homes," says Madison ReStore director Jen Voichick.

The local ReStore has achieved sufficient stature that this weekend it is hosting the largest national ReStore conference since the concept took root in the 1990s. Scheduled for Monday and Tuesday, Nov. 7-8, the conference is drawing 225 people to the Sheraton Madison Inn on John Nolen Drive.

"We planned to have 150 people," says Voichick, noting that early attendance estimates were overwhelmed in a hurry and had to be revised.

The upper Midwest accounts for almost half of the registrations. But 12 delegates each are coming from Tennessee and North Carolina. Six more states — Colorado, Indiana, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania and

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Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Wed.-Sat.

Virginia — are each sending at least five people to the conference, and 35 states in all will have at least one person in attendance. About 60% represent existing ReStores; the remainder are from Habitat chapters and individuals who intend to establish ReStores in their communities.

A former building-trades contractor whose career was cut short by injury, Voichick had been troubled at construction sites by the volume of building material she had seen that was destined for the waste stream. Her investigation into alternatives led her to approach Habitat for Humanity of Dane County, where she learned that more than 100 ReStores existed across North America — but none in Madison.

That was in 2000. She set about writing a business plan and applying for grants to underwrite the establishment of a Madison ReStore. A Waste Reduction and Recycling Demonstration Grant from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources was critical.

"We opened one week after 9/11," Voichick remembers. "One of the things I wanted to do was have a really specific niche," she adds. While a few other Habitat ReStores sell appliances and clothing, she was intent on sticking to building materials so as to not trespass on



MARK SIBLEY

Voichick finds new uses for construction material destined for the landfill.

the existing niches fashioned by organizations like Goodwill and St. Vincent de Paul.

All of the building materials sold by the Madison ReStore are donated. About half is surplus, with the other half used or recovered through its deconstruction program — an effort to remove cabinets, windows, floors, fixtures and other salvageable surface materials before a residential demolition project begins.

Voichick says the Madison ReStore has set a target of 10% annual sales growth for the next five years. "It was higher the first couple of years because we were new," she notes. "Everyone opened up their storage sheds."

And how. In its first 10 months, Madison's Habitat ReStore diverted 315 tons of donated building material from landfills — generating more than \$220,000 in sales to support Dane County Habitat for Humanity. The following year, 573 tons were diverted, and sales grew to almost \$340,000. The third fiscal year saw 770 tons diverted and more than \$450,000 in sales. For the year ending June 2005, the numbers were 572 tons diverted and almost \$500,000 in sales.

During the same interval, the number of ReStores across the U.S. tripled from more than 100 to more than 300, including one in Appleton and one in Plymouth, Wis. Conference registrations from Hartford, Kewaskum, La Crosse, Menominee Falls, Milwaukee, Waukesha and West Bend suggest growing interest in other parts of the state.

Voichick cites a dramatic rise in the number of inquiries she fields from would-be Habitat ReStore start-ups. The conference will answer their questions on budgeting, marketing, volunteer coordination, fund-raising and managing material flow.

Among the presenters: Nathan Engstrom, program director of Green Built Home; Fritz Grutzner, senior vice president for brand strategy at Lindsay Stone & Briggs; architect Lou Host-Jablonski of the Design Coalition Inc.; Rebecca Krantz of the East Isthmus Neighborhoods Planning Council; United Way of Dane County's Kathy Martinson; Brian Miller, executive director at Habitat for Humanity of Dane County; Sustain Dane Director Bryant Moroder; Madison Environmental Group president Sonya Newenhouse; Dane County recycling manager John Reindl; and Candice Sovinski, DNR's recycling grants manager.

"Through the conference, we hope to establish a network or hub [of ReStores]," says Voichick. "I think it's a really good sign to have so many of these popping up around the country." ♦

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