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Home Sweet Home!

S.C.'s Mary Erickson Community Housing Helps Families

San Clemente Group's Mission Is to Help Families

Mary Erickson Community Housing works with families to find affordable housing and a place they can call home.

*by Jeanne Davis
Community contributor*

There is much more to San Clemente than its great downtown shopping, close proximity to the beach and friendly residents.

For example, a hard-working, but little known San Clemente organization, Mary Erickson Community Housing, has played a significant role in the lives of many San Clemente residents, as well as families in other surrounding communities for years.

Helping comes first and foremost

The mission of Mary Erickson Community Housing is to “promote the well-being of working families by preserving and increasing the supply of affordable housing throughout Southern California.”

No one knows and understands that better than Jess, his wife Julia, and their three children, Randall, Clara and Parker, a young family of five who were relocated to San Clemente due to a job transfer.

Here is their story, in their own words.

“For 2 years our family could not find affordable rent near my husband’s job in Orange County, and we were forced to live apart spending only weekends together. As this living arrangement began wearing on our family, especially on the children, we didn’t know what to do.

“When we found Mary Erickson Community Housing we were overjoyed to find an organization in Orange County providing affordable housing for working families. We lived in MECH housing for about 2 years and attended life skills classes while we got back on our feet.

“We are so grateful to Mary Erickson Community Housing and the MECH staff, and all of its supporters for giving our family the opportunity to start anew. Today, we are overjoyed to say that WE DID IT! Just last month we were able to move into a home of our own.”

Who is Mary Erickson

In the 1980s, Mary Erickson, a long-time resident of San Clemente, was a community activist with a concern about housing issues in San Clemente especially for working families whose limited income was insufficient to rent or buy a suitable



Jess and Julia, who chose to remain anonymous, were helped by the Mary Erickson Community Housing in finding a home in San Clemente.
Photo courtesy of MECH



On Aug. 2, Mary Erickson Community Housing will host its annual fundraiser at Salt Creek Beach.

Photo courtesy of Mary Erickson Community Housing

place to live in this city.

After much discussion and investigation of housing needs initiated by Mary, the League of Women Voters of the Capistrano Bay, and other community leaders, the need for affordable housing for working families was abundantly clear.

Mary started by monitoring housing activities in San Clemente. As a member of the League of Women Voters, Mary got the organization to conduct a study on homelessness in 1985.

Legacy continues

After Mary passed away in late 1980, her fellow League



The couple's children are happy they have a new home in the "Spanish Village by the Sea."
Photo courtesy of MECH

members continued her work and started Mary Erickson Community Housing in 1991, named in honor of Mary Erickson and her dedication to affordable housing.

Initially named the Mary Erickson Foundation, it began with a \$200 bank account and committed, visionary volunteers.

In 1994, the Mary Erickson Foundation acquired its first apartment project, an eight unit blighted property in the city of San Clemente. After a total renovation of the property, the first rental units for low income working families became available.

The improvements made to this property (and subsequent properties purchased by the organization) were instrumental in improving the overall well-being of the entire neighborhood.

Over the next 7 years, two additional apartment properties were purchased in San Clemente and renovated, and the organization began acquiring and reselling HUD foreclosure single-family homes to qualifying households. During this period the organization's name was changed to Mary Erickson Community Housing.

Help arrives

In 2002, MECH hired a full time executive director, Susan McDevitt, who brought with her the knowledge and skill set to grow the organization into the full scale development organization it is today.

Continued on next page

3 WAYS MECH HELPS PEOPLE

- **We rent to working** families with a household income less than \$37,800, which is 50 percent of the Orange County median income. The family must consist of at least one adult and one child. MECH maintains a waiting list at all times and is an equal housing opportunity non-profit organization.
- **Our rents do not** exceed one half of the median rent in Orange County. Currently, rents are \$700 per month for a two-bedroom apartment and \$800 per month for a three-bedroom apartment. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Orange County is \$1,300, and a three-bedroom apartment rents for an average of \$1,600.
- **There is no set** time limit after which tenants must move, however they are encouraged to improve their job skills in order to increase their income and move into market rate housing. Income verification takes place annually in order to determine that they still qualify to live in our apartments. All tenants are re-evaluated at the end of three years. —MECH

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With the aid of a dedicated board of directors and three full-time staff members, the organization's activities have expanded to several cities in addition to San Clemente and include multi-family apartment acquisition, rehabilitation and rental, new construction, and home ownership development including new construction and acquisition/rehabilitation of suitable properties.

Others join in to help

MECH has also developed and manages a cutting-edge employer assisted housing program with the St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort which has more than 70 participants.

In addition to housing needs, MECH has developed a "Life Skills" program that provides education and training for the residents of their housing, as well as employees at the St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort. These classes provide educational programs which increase self-sufficiency and knowledge. Their vision is "to empower individuals to live their best life by providing resources that offer opportunities for success through career development, education, financial management, health and wellness, personal growth, family enrichment, and community involvement."

Resort on board for a while

The St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort has been offering the program to nearly 100 low-income team members for more than five years. The turnover rate for those participating in the program is less than 12 percent.

"It has been my pleasure to work with Mary Erickson Community Housing for the past year. Through our rental assistance program we are able to attract quality workers and retain them for longer periods of time," said the manager of the hotel.

"We have shown that rent subsidized employees are more likely to stay employed with us when other factors are not constant. Our partnership with MECH for affordable housing has allowed many working families not to merely exist in Orange County, but also thrive as their careers have grown within the resort."

Additionally a father and his daughter have also been able to prosper thanks to MEHC.

"I would just like to say how much the program helps my daughter and I. We are able to live so close to my work and my daughter's school. Not only the supplemental income, but also the classes they have for us are full of very useful information.

"I am a single dad with only one income so without this program, I could not afford to live in Orange County," said the father an associate at the St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort.

Life skills classes help train

Helping Families Find Homes in O.C.

94

The year Mary Erickson Community Housing acquired its first apartment project, an eight-unit blighted property in S.C.



These three children, Randall, Clara and Parker, are part of the young family of five who were relocated to San Clemente due to their dad's job transfer and helped by the Mary Erickson Community Housing organization.

Photo courtesy of MEHC

Speaking of classes, important Life Skills Education classes include such topics as: Consumer Credit Counseling, Banking Basics, How to Become a First Time Home Buyer, Save on Your Utility Bills, Alcohol, Drug, and Domestic Abuse, Insurance, Why Do I Need It, Stress Management, Career and Personal Development.

Thanks to the classes, in 2004, 22 percent of MECH residents transitioned to non-subsidized housing. In 2005, 10 percent of the families moved on to purchase their own homes.

Also, the majority of our teens are on a college-track curriculum or are currently pursuing higher education!

Recently, the Orange County Consumer Credit Council, Legal Aid Society, and Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo were just a few of the organizations generously providing some of these classes.

Teens get help, too

Teens are offered special programs to develop and broaden their knowledge of opportunities available to them. For example, recently the teenage girls living in MECH housing were given the opportunity to participate in the Girls in Ocean Science Conference at the Ocean Institute in Dana Point.

They met with 16 prominent female scientists from around the county who interacted with the girls in a series of hands-on workshops aboard the research vessel, Sea Explorer, and



Big Benefit on the Way

On Aug. 2, the Mary Erickson Community Housing organization will host its annual fundraiser at Salt Creek Beach.

in the Ocean Institute's teaching lab. This experience opened up a whole new world to these teens and introduced them to the oceanographic sciences and career opportunities. It is an experience these young ladies will never forget. Additional teen programs have included career opportunity presentations provided by Saddleback Community College which included a private tour of the campus, and a unique "behind the scenes" tour of Disneyland to learn about careers in theater arts and stagecraft design.

The retired school teacher and long time San Clemente resident was a visionary who saw a need and went to work to fulfill that need. Her vision has touched many lives and shows what one hard working, inspired and dedicated individual can accomplish.

"Mary Erickson Community Housing has grown into a development corporation with a cause. For too many working families in our community, the gap between income and rent has become impossible to bridge," McDevitt said.

"MECH works to provide hope and assistance to these families. In the last year, MECH has provided over 525 people with the most basic of necessities, a clean, safe affordable home. We hope to welcome home more families in the years to come."

An organization like Mary Erickson Community Housing needs a great deal of financial support to continue its mission in San Clemente and other neighboring communities.

Some of that support comes in the form of grants and programs provided by the federal government and local cities.

Other funds come from local monies raised at the organization's one and only annual fundraiser—a unique event called 'Sunset at Salt Creek.'

This fundraiser is a beach party extraordinaire and is supported, year after year, by a group of local restaurants who provide a 'taste' of their wonderful cuisine.

Held at Salt Creek Beach in Dana Point, more than 300 guests enjoy specialties from area eateries like Ruth's Chris Steak House, St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort, Sarducci's Capistrano Depot, Salt Creek Grille, Adele's at the San Clemente Inn, RJ's Cafe, and The Melting Pot.

Wine tasting is provided by Regal Wine Co., and craft-man beer is provided by Left Coast Brewing Co.

Add to that dancing on the sand, a hosted bar, live auction, opportunity drawings, and the breathtaking sunset over the ocean, and you have a party you don't want to miss. This year's event will be held on Saturday Aug. 2., from 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Call 949-369-5419 for tickets.

Our funding depends primarily on the generosity of individuals, corporations, churches, and civic groups. We receive long term, low interest rate loans, from both the city of San Clemente and the county of Orange and we hold major fundraisers throughout the year.

Employers pay us when we do special projects for them such as Life Skills Education, conducted by experts in their respective fields.

Our 203k program in which we purchase HUD owned, blighted properties, refurbish them, and then sell them to first time homebuyers is also a source of income.

We schedule six classes per year on a regular basis.

Whenever a question or concern arises we will schedule a special tenant meeting.

Our speakers have special skills and expertise and are drawn from the community. Classes are held in both English and Spanish. The goal is to enhance the self-sufficiency of each family. —*Jeanne Davis*

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