SHARP: 'We've put down roots in our life'

Continued from Page 1A

'Life-changing'

Funny thing is, Michelle and her husband (who preferred to withhold their last names from publication) had never even heard of SHARP until a friend casually mentioned it, back when the family of five was living in an apartment near Astoria High School.

"Literally the next day, I went in and applied," Michelle said, "and here we are two years later."

And it was a rigorous two years.

Mitchell helped them find a three-bedroom house in Lyngstad Heights with a backyard that overlooks the Lewis & Clark River. Built in 1972 on 0.28 acres, the 1,500-square-foot house was badly in need of a tune-up, which made it eligible for the program.

Luckily, the house had "the right things wrong with it," Mitchell said. No compromised foundations, no fundamental flaws.

Once the feds approved their application, the family ended up acquiring a loan with an interest rate well below market rate. They bought the house for the $160,000 purchase price, leaving several thousand dollars for repairs and upgrades.

As he does with all his clients, Mitchell made sure Michelle and Jason knew exactly what they were getting themselves into.

"What they sign up for is serious. It's life-changing," he said. "When their friends are going to see a ball game or (going) camping? Not these guys. These guys got a job here to do."

Typically, SHARP develops full subdivisions for people of limited means to work on collectively and then move into. A single family working on their own house is a rarity, Mitchell said.

"In the state of Oregon, Michelle and Jason will be one of 15 families that's ever pulled this off," he said.

Photos by Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Jason walks through the backyard. The views and the lack of noise are two things that drew Michelle and Jason to the property.

When Jason and Michelle purchased the house, it had no insulation in any walls or floors. Now the house is completely insulated.

Jason looks out of the window at his children playing in the front yard. One of the next projects for Jason and Michelle is carpeting the floor in the living room.

Labor intensive

Under the guidance of their foreman, Bruce Holz — who, Michelle said, "makes the impossible possible" — they mended and modernized the house with help from friends and relatives, always meeting or exceeded the required 30 hours of work per week.

"(SHARP doesn't) do it for you, they just show you how, make sure you have the right materials and know how to do it," Michelle said, "and then it's up to you,"

The couple contracted out the drywall work, but they personally installed new windows, gutted and reworked the bathrooms, put in new trim inside and outside, resided the south side and the entire garage, and fixed the back deck. Soon, they will install new floors.

"It's not for quitters," Michelle said of SHARP.

"After working on this house for such a long time, you feel like a licensed carpenter," Jason said. "Everywhere I go, I see all kinds of stuff I want to rip down and put up, and redo this and do that ... It grows with you."

A weatherization grant from the Community Action Team went toward insulating the walls, floors and attic, and installing a brand-new electric furnace — a move that simultaneously lowered their utility bills and boosted the home's value.

A separate loan — which doesn't have to be repaid unless and until the couple sells the house — allowed them to add an insert to the fireplace.

"There's no confusion about where this house is at and what could go wrong with it," Mitchell said. "These guys know the quality of their house."

Putting down roots

Perhaps the most unexpected upshot for Michelle and Jason is that, by going from renters to homeowners, they managed to cut their monthly housing expenses by about $100 — from $750 in rent to a projected $650 (including mortgage payments, property taxes and homeowners insurance) — while roughly doubling their living space.

"Every person that I meet that I give an application to, or tell about the program — no one knows anything about it," she said. "I don't think it's a well-kept secret, I think that people just don't know their resources in the towns that they live in, and I was one of them."

Their three children — two daughters, aged 14 and 11, and a son, 7 — put their sweat into the place as well, cleaning, painting baseboards and hauling wood. The work — and, especially, the long wait to move in — was difficult for them.

But now the kids are looking forward to growing up in a real house, having parties and making friends in a new neighborhood, they said.

The older daughter remarked that the multi-month team effort "created a lot of memories, and we bonded more."

The neighbors have welcomed the family, bringing them cookies, fresh-based fudge and elk chili.

"I still haven't figured out who cut the grass," Jason said. "They did it twice. I'd love to thank them."

Michelle and Jason hope this house — the one they made their own, and know as if they had built it themselves — is their last, their "forever home," they said.

"We're more stable," Michelle said. "We've put down roots in our life."

For sale: Grover ran the store until the day he died

Continued from Page 1A

Within a minute or two, Cassy Utzinger was ringing up a box of ant traps for Phillips, who reminisced about how the store has helped her family over the years.

"This place is an institution," Phillips said, talking about the time her husband was irritated and in need of a hod, an antiquated tool for carrying bricks.

Grover "went directly to the hod, even with all these things," Phillips said. "It's a good place to be, and it's a part of America …"

"… that's dwindling away," Cassy Utzinger finished.

Grover Utzinger ran the store until June 2, 2014, the day he died. Cassy Utzinger, who worked at her father's store for 22 years, left a job at Wauna Mill to run her father's store, along with her brother and sister and son Chance as the newest employee. Fine with being her father's perpetual runner-up in the product knowledge department, Cassy Utzinger said her hope was to continue the operation as is. The new buyer can change the business or go with a different supplier than True Value, she said, but she hopes the hardware store will continue. The store has fielded interest from a few parties, she added, including one person who asked if it would be alright to keep the Utzinger name if they took over.

Since her return to the store, Cassy Utzinger said she has had a few strange experiences — merchandise flying off a hanger, a small white light moving across a security camera — that have led her to believe Grover Utzinger never retired.

"I just think Dad's still here," she said of her father's presence. "I think it's Dad checking on us."

EO MEDIA group
eomediagroup.com
The most valuable and respected source of local news, advertising and information for our communities.
www.eomediagroup.com