

## newHOMES

## HOMEFRONT

# Feeding the community spirit

Heather Saunders is a first for Ottawa — a community co-ordinator who bakes cookies and knows everything there is to know about Heritage Hills



SHEILA BRADY

Heather Saunders is one-part cookie baker and two-parts community booster in the burgeoning community of Heritage Hills in Kanata.

The effervescent Kanata resident doesn't sell homes directly in the community that opened in October 1997 and now counts 150 families

as residents, with another 50 homes under construction. Instead, the Katimavik woman is on the payroll of the two builders, Phoenix Homes and Coscan Brookfield Homes, and carries the title of community co-ordinator.

And on cool weekends she can be found on the second floor of the shared sales centre on Hemlo Crescent baking cookies and dressed in a large white apron and a fitted white cap such as those worn by women 100 years ago.

The marketing folks hired by the two builders call her Aunt Polly, but many of the new residents know her as Heather, organizer of frequent community events and knowledgeable about all things local. Heather Saunders puts new residents in touch with babysitters, knows where the churches are located and the time of services, when the buses run and which school gym is the setting for the local Brownie group.

Last week, Ms. Saunders was handing out Canadian flags to the 150 residents in Heritage Hills, which sits on the north side of the Queensway at Terry Fox Drive. Almost every home in the community was flying one of the red and white flags in the days leading up to Canada Day.

There was standing room only in mid-May when she invited Dirk Visback, the knowledgeable floral manager at Loblaws in Centrum, to come help residents start their gardens, protect young trees or plant successful container boxes.

"Three hours later people were still asking questions. They were hungry for information," says Ottawa's first paid community co-ordinator.

"We wanted Heritage Hills to be sold as a community first and the homes second," says Coscan Brookfield's Tammy Vatcher. "We wanted the homeowner to feel they were moving into something special. And it's the community co-ordinator who can make that transition as easy as possible."



ROD MACIVOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Heather Saunders, Ottawa's first community co-ordinator, bakes cookies and stages special events in Heritage Hills.

Phoenix, the developer which bought the prime 200 acres of real estate, and its building partner, Coscan Brookfield, have shared a community vision since day one. The builders hired respected Toronto architect Ken Viljeon to design a series of modest to upscale homes with a Victorian theme and to plan streetscapes that left rocky outcroppings for variety. It was Mr. Viljeon who created and designed the Victorian-inspired homes built by Monarch in Unionville north of Toronto and in the Stittsville community of Crossing Bridge.

Each home and street of Heritage Hills is part of a final picture, which will also include scrolled light standards, a man-made pond and extensive planting and a gazebo.

Ms. Saunders is part of the picture of Heritage Hills, the human catalyst and early heartbeat of the community.

The concept of a community co-ordinator is new to Ottawa, says John Biddle of Biddle & Cranny Advertising, the marketing firm hired by the two builders for Heritage Hills.

The Ottawa builders borrowed the concept after watching Tribute Homes in Toronto hire community co-ordinators with great success. Five years ago, Tribute hired its first community co-ordinator for its innovative community of 1,000 single-family homes in the tiny community of Brooklin located on the fringe of Whitby.

"We basically hired the community co-ordi-

nator to distinguish ourselves from other builders," says Sarah Allworth, public relations and marketing co-ordinator for the company which has built more than 10,000 homes across Toronto during the past 15 years. "We wanted to make sure that Brooklin was a nice place to live with great community spirit and lots of community involvement."

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Heather Saunders,  
Community co-ordinator, Heritage Hills

Tribute hired Amber Frost as community co-ordinator of Brooklin because she grew up in Whitby and knew the community inside out. There have been Halloween, Christmas and Easter parties, weekend seminars and a quarterly community newsletter.

"We want to kickstart a strong community feeling," says Ms. Allworth, who oversees mar-

keting for Brooklin, which offers homes with an early Ontario architecture, big front porches and gabled roof lines.

Now Tribute has community co-ordinators in six of its Toronto area communities. "We were the first in Ontario to hire community co-ordinators, an idea that was introduced by Disney when they built a new community in Florida," says Ms. Allworth.

Today, Heather Saunders is planning ahead for the fall, looking to stage a community event every second weekend from the Hemlo sales centre. "I want to make this a welcoming place. A community where neighbours know each other and a community that can come together." There will be more seminars, a community newsletter, *Heritage News*, and more cookies.

Ms. Saunders is on duty on the second floor of the sales centre on weekends, ensuring children are content, so their parents can look at plans and talk with sales representatives.

There may also come a day when Ms. Saunders will help organize a Neighbourhood Watch or Block Parent program in Heritage Hills. "I want to help new residents know about the community before they move in and help make this the best possible community."

Sheila Brady is the Citizen Homes editor. Read previous Homefront columns at [www.ottawacitizen.com](http://www.ottawacitizen.com)