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## Building Houses for the People

*Architect Gary Struthers '93 has focused his work and his free time on creating affordable urban housing that is green and beautiful. Here's how he does it.*

by Susan Peery

photos courtesy Gary Struthers



Gary volunteers as a construction captain during Habitat for Humanity's four-day East Bay Annual Build-a-Thon in California.

was a requirement.

Today, architecture is a stand-alone major, the only four-year Bachelor of Science degree in the subject at a public liberal arts college in New England, and "learning by doing" is still a core value, as is the emphasis on green design and sustainable practices. Communicorps will celebrate its 18th year in 2010 by taking on another round of community-based design challenges featuring collaborative work between student design teams and

When Gary Struthers '93 was a Keene State student, his architecture program was part of technology studies, a construction-oriented curriculum rooted in hands-on learning, sustainable design, and strong technical skills.

From the beginning of the program in 1991, community-based service learning through the Communicorps course

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local nonprofits.



**Multi-family condominium units in Richmond, CA**



Gary Struthers, who recalls spending many productive hours at Keene State in Charlie Sheaff's woodworking shop honing his building skills, still has that hands-on side, and it has served him well in a distinguished career as an architect.

His firm, Struthers Dias Architects in California, excels at creating affordable, ecological urban homes. He and partner Theresa Ballard Dias are committed advocates for affordable housing in the East Bay/Oakland area, and they believe that volunteering is an essential component in that cause. They both sit on the boards of local nonprofits and regularly contribute time, skill, and considerable energy to Habitat for Humanity East Bay, Rebuilding Together Oakland (RTO), Allied Housing, and other organizations.

Gary left Keene State with a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Technology, Drafting, and Design (magna cum laude) and headed to Boston Architectural Center for more art and design courses (which have since been added to Keene State's curriculum). His next stop was Miami University of Ohio for a master's degree.

**COMMENTS**



**Edes Avenue Phase A in Oakland, a Habitat East Bay project creating 26 affordable houses for first-time homeowners"**

In 1997, he started a student-run studio to renovate and create affordable housing and got involved with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity when a young family of four had triplets and asked for help. He also organized design-build projects with Miami students to create affordable housing in a Cincinnati inner-city neighborhood called Over-the-Rhine.

Continuing west, Gary went to California in 2001 to work for architect Mike Pyatok. "All students of affordable housing know of Mike," Gary said. "He is one of the most prominent architect specializing in low-income housing." Although creating high-quality affordable housing is, in Gary's words, "a tough business model," in the hands of committed experts it is the best way to produce housing that is dignified, functional, and sustainable.



**Fuller Gardens in San Leandro, supportive housing for residents with developmental disabilities**

"It is important to bring good design to the work, not just a simple white box," he explained. "Sustainability requires durable, environmentally sensitive materials." In California, where water consumption is key, it means choosing low-flow showers and toilets, xeriscaping, and landscapes that don't depend on high-maintenance grass. Child-friendly play spaces and attention to passive solar siting are other considerations.

Gary's design-build background and skills pays off in easing the inherent tension between architects and builders. "It helps if builders know you can do the hands-on part," Gary said. "The owner, the builder, and the architect are all on one team from the outset, and the relationship has to be good."

In his volunteer work, Gary works side by side with builders and other partners involved with Habitat for Humanity's East Bay affiliate. "I have worked on several projects with them," he explained. "The specific project that I designed pro-bono is called Edes Avenue Phase A in East Oakland."

Working with first-time homeowners who put in at least 500 hours of sweat equity, the Habitat team designed and built 26 homes on two acres in the Bay area, three of which are certified as LEED Gold (with the others also built to those specs). Habitat East Bay's goal is to create 40 units a year to help relieve the chronic lack of modestly priced houses.

Gary has also volunteered for years for RTO, which rehabilitates the homes of low-income elderly and disabled homeowners so they can continue to live independently and safely in their own homes.

Gary and his wife, Deb, who is also an architect, try to balance their work time with their volunteer time. "Struthers Dias Architects are participants in the One Percent Solution," Gary said. "It's a philosophy that encourages people to spend one percent of their time volunteering, and tries to get businesses to devote one percent of their business effort to



**Broadmoor, senior housing that includes gardens and outdoor living space**

volunteer work."

In Gary's case, his ability to balance the artistic with the pragmatic, and his belief in a collaborative, problem-based approach have led him to a satisfying and productive life as

architect/builder/volunteer. Nearly every summer, the Struthers come home to visit relatives in New Hampshire and Vermont. When we talked with Gary last summer, he was helping his brother put an addition on his house – the perfect holiday, Gary said.

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[More photographs of Gary's professional work.](#)

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