

First-time homeowners settle in

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By APRIL WRIGHT

For James and Suzanne Smith, their new home is everything they thought it would be.

The house on Middleton Street in Galax is just what they needed — two bedrooms, two baths, vinyl siding, their own front yard and back deck.

The house even had enough space for a “Navajo room,” where James — a full-blooded Navajo Indian — stores pictures and crafts to reflect on his heritage.

The Smiths showcased their new home in an open house tour for National Homeownership Month in June, sponsored by USDA Rural Development.

Rural Development helps people achieve the American dream, providing homeownership opportunities by awarding grants and loans to very low-, low- and moderate-income families. This open house, which showcased four homes, was designed to show that owning a home is possible for anyone, said Jeanie Barbrow of Rural Development.

James, 42, and Suzanne, 56, have been happily married for 13 years, she bragged. But this is the first time they've ever owned a home.

“When we got into the house, it just added another spark to our marriage,” she said.

Suzanne said it's just nice to have a place they can call their own, and a major plus is that the home comes with a washer and dryer — which they never owned until now.

“This is such a change from paying rent for a small apartment to putting money into what will be ours,” said Suzanne, who moved into the house three weeks ago.

“We're the lucky ones, and we're very blessed to have this,” said James, with a beaming smile.

Suzanne said they're finally “home sweet home.”

The Smiths have been both members and volunteers of the Mount Rogers Powerhouse in Galax since 1991, and that is where the couple met.

The Lord, Suzanne said, is trying to make strong people out of them and have provided them with a better outlook on life. And since they've moved in, they have adopted two kittens, which has helped ease their depression. Before, the couple was not allowed to have pets at their apartment.

“It's just given us so much confidence since we moved in,” said Suzanne. “It's like you've won something and you don't know why. Everyone believed in us.”

The Smiths said they have a lot of people to thank for making it possible, including Mount Rogers Powerhouse for support, Barbrow of Rural Development and Linda Powers of Helping Overcoming Poverty's Existence (HOPE).



Photo by April Wright
Suzanne and James Smith just moved into their new home in the Knob Hill subdivision in Galax.

Powers, their mental health worker, connected the Smiths to Barbrow.

HOPE, incorporated in 1993, works with Rural Development to reduce the conditions contributing to poverty in Southwest Virginia and help low-income and disadvantaged families to achieve solutions for sustaining affordable housing.

In the past year, USDA Rural Development has moved four couples into new homes just in the Knob Hill subdivision on Middleton Street. Some of that land was a gift from the city and some was sold to HOPE at an affordable price.

Couple Donald and Beth Caldwell, who moved into a home on the other side of Middleton Street, said they're just glad to have some peace and quiet.

Before moving to their home, Rodney and Jeane Howard lived in an apartment so small they couldn't put their Christmas tree up, but now they have plenty of room for that.

And 73-year-old Jearleen Combs recently moved into a cottage in the subdivision.

"I'm just thrilled to death," said the first-time homeowner. "It just feels real good to have a nice, quiet home."

Showcasing the four newest homes is an opportunity to feature what is available and what the contractor, Thomas Blevins of Fries, can do. He works closely with the homeowners to accommodate their individual needs.

"Thomas has really worked with the people to help them afford nice homes," said Barbrow. Seeing this, people can gain hope of owning their own home, and that's what we're highlighting," said Travis Jackson of Rural Development.

Statewide, Rural Development has provided \$200 million in grants in loans since Oct. 1, 2008, with one third being invested in Southwest Virginia for infrastructure water projects, such as ones in Grayson and Carroll. Other grants and loans fund home repair projects and home purchases.

In 2008, more than 1,600 Virginia families moved into new homes and more than 250 families were able to obtain much-needed repairs to their existing homes due to Rural Development.

"Everybody knows everyone here in this close-knit community," said Jackson. "This area exemplified what we're trying to accomplish."

Eligibility is income-based. Barbrow, whose office is located in Wytheville, is at Rooftop of Virginia in Galax on Thursdays — by appointment only — to discuss eligibility with clients.