

Lack of workforce housing on Saltspring

Paradise Found

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By Pat Burkette

On Saltspring? In a place that's known for its waterfront estates, world-class artists, and glorious kayaking?

In fact, there are enough people living on the far side of paradise in rat-infested trailers, decrepit cabins, tents and vehicles that Rose and her brother Richard felt moved to donate a former fish plant on half an acre -- worth \$1.2 million -- to help build Murakami Gardens, Saltspring's first affordable housing project.

The attractive beige and brown, two-storey, energy-efficient 27-suite apartment building, with a total price tag of \$5 million, has just opened its doors to some of the island's increasing numbers of individuals and families at risk of homelessness.

"We know what it's like to live in degrading and dehumanizing situations," explained 71-year-old Rose, who once taught nursing at the University of B.C. "We lived in some terrible, terrible places. You wouldn't even call them houses."

Her family's personal journey into the far side of paradise is just part of the Murakami Gardens story. But it's an important part, because there might not have been a Murakami Gardens without it.

That journey began in 1942, when the Murakami family, including parents Kimiko and Katsuyori and children Alice, Mary, Violet, Rose and Richard, were forced off their land and sent to the grim internment camps with thousands of other Japanese-Canadians. Another son, Bruce, was born there. At the end of the Second World War, they moved on to fly-infested shacks next to pig barns on a sugar beet farm in Alberta.

In 1954, the Murakamis came back to Saltspring, growing berries and vegetables on a farm on Rainbow Road, where Richard, Rose and Violet still live today, next door to Murakami Gardens.

Kimiko had not wanted to return to the island, but Katsuyori insisted they face those they felt had betrayed them, including Gavin Mouat, the government custodian for enemy alien property in the Gulf Islands at the time.

On behalf of the government, Mouat confiscated and sold their original 17-acre property despite assurances to Kimiko that it would be kept safe.

"Gavin Mouat was a friend of my parents at the time. When we were forced off our land, Mom said Gavin Mouat put his arms around her and said 'Kimi, don't worry. There won't be one chopstick missing when you return.'" said Rose. "My mother said this over and over to us when we were growing up."

The Murakamis held out hope that there would somehow, someday, be an honourable settling-up.

Those hopes were dashed when former Saltspring resident Torazo Iwasaki lost a court case that was a benchmark for interned Gulf Islands Japanese-Canadians.

In 1967, Iwasaki's lawyers appealed to the federal government to pay him what his confiscated 640-acre property -- with two and a quarter miles of shoreline -- was worth in 1967 dollars: \$1.5 million, rather than the \$5,000 he received while in a Greenwood internment camp.

Iwasaki's land was conveyed to the secretary of state in Ottawa by Mouat, who was custodial agent for the property and had been since 1942, when it was confiscated. On the same day, it was conveyed again, to Salt Spring Lands, a real estate company Mouat was the president of.

Iwasaki lost his fight with the federal government and never received what he felt was proper remuneration for his property.

The past continued to inform the Murakamis' present. They weren't allowed to donate funds to plant a weeping cherry tree in Centennial Park in Ganges because of the cenotaph's location in the park. "One of the Park Committee members told my mother, we don't want people of your race donating," said Rose.

But eventually, with the support of local residents and summer visitors who came regularly to buy their produce, the future began to look brighter.

"That's why we wanted the building called Murakami Gardens," said Rose, "because we want the people living there to feel that same sense of rebirth and prosperity we felt then."

Along with prosperity and a growing real estate empire came a desire to help others going through tough times.

At Murakami Motors, Richard's auto repair business adjacent to the Murakami home, he performs daily acts of kindness while taking the pulse of a community that includes a single mom, whose broken car symbolizes a broken life and the man with the Mercedes.

In 2004, Richard was touched by what he heard about Saltspring housing. People from old island families said their children couldn't remain on the island because they couldn't find a place to live. Island newbies confided about living in tents and vehicles.

"Richard said that we better do something or there would only be rich people living here," Rose said.

The siblings decided to donate the fish plant site they'd bought years before, for low-income housing. There was no repeat of the cherry tree episode. The community gratefully accepted and came onboard to help. Ironically, before their dream could become a reality, the Murakamis had to spend more time on the far side of paradise.

The family awoke to smoke on May 5, 2006, escaping before their house burned to the ground. Homeless once more, they had to cope with building issues at Murakami Gardens while supervising construction of their new home.

A need for 34 parking spaces required under zoning regulations almost killed the affordable housing project. An argument that the low-income tenants living there couldn't afford cars anyway, the purchase of two cars for a car-share program, and a petition of support from Murakami Motors customers won a variance to approve the 12 spaces that would fit on the small site.

Given the green light, gardens construction manager Brent Baker said, "We tried to create home, not institution.

"We used wood baseboards instead of rubber ones. We used eggshell latex instead of the semi-gloss that's recommended because it's easier to clean."

Baker also built in energy-efficient features such as a solar hot-water heat-pump system and extra insulation.

If the tenants who have just moved into Murakami Gardens' eight bachelor suites (rented at \$560 a month), 12 one-bedroom suites (at \$667), five two-bedroom suites (at \$839) and two three-bedrooms (at \$1,065) are any indication, he succeeded.

"Two years ago I lived in a tent in a campground, with just a porta-potty and cold water for \$400 a month," said Crystal Doucette, a 48-year-old on long-term disability due to emphysema and arthritis.

Tina Jones, 35, who works at two jobs as a hospital dietary aide and house cleaner to support her seven-year-old son Cole and 13-year-old daughter Kayla, couldn't make ends meet when she rented a 600-square-foot, ant-infested cabin in the boonies for \$875 a month plus \$170 every two months for hydro. Now everything is included for \$835.

Verla Martell, 23, lived in a tent on a mountain with her boyfriend for a year because they couldn't find anything affordable.

"When we got kicked out of there, we lived in our truck with our dogs, parking in different spots," she said. Martell, who is a member of the Cree Nation, retreated to Nanaimo, and, as she had as a 13-year-old escaping foster homes, ended up living on the street.

"I came back to Saltspring and got support to get off drugs," said Martell, who can access social programs and services through Saltspring's non-profit Community Services Society, which now owns and runs Murakami Gardens.

Martell, who shares a suite with her nine-month-old son and 17-year-old mentally challenged brother, said, "Now I stand in the middle of my apartment and I can't believe what I have."

But tenant stories from Murakami Gardens are only the tip of the iceberg of need, according to Saltspring housing activists like Neddy Harris, who says the lack of decent rental accommodation on Saltspring boils down to the island's evolution from a rural community to a destination community that has left renters, many of them workers who serve island tourists, out in the cold.

Tourist accommodations attracting big bucks have thrived while rental units barely survived.

"We lost three staff recently because they couldn't get housing on Saltspring," agreed Anne Ringheim, general manager of Harbour House Hotel, which pays wages of \$11 to \$16 an hour. "You can't advertise off-island to get staff, because there's no long-term place over here to live.

"You'll see cabins, which are more affordable, rented with the exclusion of May to September."

That's when landlords can get more money from tourists for the rustic holiday experience.

Ringheim has a staff member who has vacated her cabin for the summer but, like other roving tenants who couch-surf or bunk with relatives for the summer, she doesn't want the notoriety that could prevent her returning to her cabin in the fall.

The Islands Trust, local government on Saltspring, recently moved to make vacation rentals illegal. At the same time, it wants owners to bring the island's ramshackle rental cabins, which rarely meet building code, up to health and building standards to become legal long-term rentals with affordable rental agreements.

"If we legalize cottages and suites for long-term rental, more will come on the market and provide alternatives to renters," said Saltspring trustee Peter Lamb.

But Lamb admitted that meeting building standards could be costly for owners, who have lineups of people looking for low-cost housing, even if it's unsafe.

Paul Large, who as general manager of the Ganges Village Market grocery store employs 100 people at wages of \$12 to \$15 an hour, doesn't think more cabins will cut it. He says there aren't enough apartment buildings and condominiums for young workers.

"There's one apartment building here and it's sketchy," said Large, who was 37th on the list for a house rental when he arrived from Whistler in January and got turned down when he offered the owner \$2,000 cash if she'd give it to him anyway.

Harris backs him up.

"The 2006 census shows that [Saltspring] has the lowest percentage of apartments of any developed area in the province. Only 2.6 per cent of all dwellings here are apartment rentals."

Add to that a 2005 housing needs survey that found 80 per cent of Saltspring housing stock is single-family owner-occupied, and that Saltspring incomes are lower than those in surrounding areas, and you've got classic supply-demand issues. Middle-income earners aren't immune.

"We've contracted with an agency to cover nursing shortages, as have other rural locations," said Lady Minto Gulf Islands Hospital administration assistant Diana Hayes. "They send in off-island nurses for two-week blocks, and we have to cover their accommodation. There's no place to rent. We've been scrambling."

More low-income housing won't meet the needs of nurses who eventually permanently fill vacant positions, Hayes said. With hourly wages from about \$23 to \$36 an hour, they don't qualify.

Lamb favoured a Union of B.C. Municipalities initiative to get the property-purchase tax back to the communities.

"The province takes in over a billion a year from the tax," he said, "and some of that could fund affordable housing."

Janis Gauthier, a housing activist who served as Murakami Gardens project manager, says it may take shattering the Saltspring paradise myth to create more affordable housing.

Gauthier found a deeply ingrained notion of Saltspring as a haven for the wealthy when approaching public funders like CMHC, BC Housing and the Provincial Homelessness Initiative.

"Initially I did get the cocked eyebrow," Gauthier said. "There is this ... perception that everything is rosy here in paradise. Because of the tenacity of Richard and Rose, and my admiration for them, we got bloody stubborn and stuck to it. I got the funding people over here and showed them some of the squalid conditions people were living in."

Gauthier hopes wealthy people with land lying fallow will come forward and said Murakami Gardens, covenanted in perpetuity to be affordable housing, is "absolutely a first step," along with capped CMHC-established rents.

"We could have filled 10 Murakami Gardens," she said.

To learn more about the Murakamis' new project, construction of a commemorative Japanese garden on Saltspring, go to www.saltspringjapanesegarden.com. To order Ganbaru, Rose's book about her family's history, contact Caffyn Kelly at 250-537-2227. All proceeds go to the Japanese Garden Society of Salt Spring Island.