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# Changing Perceptions

High-quality housing for farm workers



Manatee Village

Operating in southern Miami-Dade County and small towns throughout Florida, Rural Neighborhoods is a nonprofit developer of housing for rural and agricultural workers.

“As a nonprofit developer of affordable housing, we have a particular niche providing housing to agricultural laborers,” says Steven Kirk, President of Rural Neighborhoods. “We are particularly proud that we are probably among the top two or three developers of housing for migrant and seasonal farm workers in the nation. Within a niche market, we are recognized as one of the national experts in that field.”

The organization presently owns 1,533 residential apartments, 15,000 square feet of commercial space and 30,000 square feet of community facilities, such as child development and community centers. Rural Neighborhoods operates 17 residential communities in six Florida communities from Tampa to Miami, and Kirk says the organization has helped to change the perception of farm worker housing.

“We feel the quality of our product design and the tough love management that we implement has changed the public image of farm worker housing in the Florida communities in which we have

## Rural Neighborhoods

**President**  
Steven Kirk

**Location**  
Miami, Florida



Pollywog Creek Senior Housing

built," he says. "This was a product that was once perhaps 'questionable', but as elected officials and planning directors see what our housing really is, compared to what they thought it would be, most realize they would be very pleased to have this quality product in their communities."

#### DRIVEN BY A MISSION

Rural Neighborhoods has received a number of awards over the years, and Kirk says that the recognition helps those in the organization not only take pride in their work, but importantly, increases the visibility and credibility of the group.

"We truly are an organization driven by our mission," he says. "We have extended our mission to serve elderly and other working families in rural communities, but our roots are in serving workers engaged in farm work. The national recognition and the awards that come help staff; whether it be the person engaged in site management, housing counseling or maintenance. They take professional pride that they do their job well and do a great deal of good. For a charitable group like ourselves, measurable success opens doors to local elected officials, investors and partners – and that means the opportunity to do more good!"

Rural Neighborhoods is relatively new to the world of green building, but the organization has embraced the movement and plans to incorporate these building practices in all new projects. It will complete its first Energy Star and NAHB Silver and Bronze rental communities in 2012. Green features will include solar water heating, solar site lighting and more.

Though the industry itself may be in the early stages of green building nationwide, we feel we are coming to green building a bit late," Kirk says. "We were certainly not on the cutting edge in the past, but today every project we have in the pipeline will be green certified. There are a number of hurdles to overcome, but it will be beneficial to the people we lease to and serve. We think there will be substantial utility savings in hot climate areas like south Florida."

Kirk also notes Rural Neighborhoods plans on owning its properties for 30 to 50 years and must make appropriate design decisions that last like choosing ceramic tile and metal roofs. This year the charitable group will rehab 80, and construct three new residential communities. These projects look to continue the path of success the organization has paved over the past several years.

"I think that we have made a step forward in design with the projects that we completed in 2011," Kirk says. "We have really moved beyond what was traditional [U.S. Department of Agriculture] Rural Development safe and decent housing to a design that will really evoke pride from tenants and more pride from the communities that surround them." Rural Neighborhoods will also be sure to keep up with the high standards of quality for which its projects have become known.

"Today, in a number of the small, rural communities we serve around south Florida, our newest products, while they may be targeted to the lowest economic tier, are probably the best multifamily rental projects in those communities," Kirk says. "I think we take a certain pride in really building the best." As the organization continues to grow, Kirk says that its team plans to extend its market footprint and may develop housing outside of the Florida market.

"Our hopes and goals are to diversify the markets we serve," he says. "We are looking to establish larger footprints in the rural communities we now serve, and are looking to establish a larger market footprint overall." □□



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