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THE BUZZ

LOCAL NEWS

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Recycling a house: Everett home goes to make new memories

By *Debra Smith, Herald Writer*

After 50 years perched on an Everett bluff, the little house at 540 Alverson Blvd. is on the move.

It's nearly midnight and the neighbors are huddled on the far sidewalk taking in the flashing lights, the police cars, the workmen in orange overalls and a house balanced on a 10-ton rig.

The moving permits aren't good until midnight and when the clock finally turns over, a worker steps forward and signals with a light: It's time to move. The house creaks forward with a deep groan, like an old man heaving himself out of an easy chair. Workers have spent days amputating the house from its foundation and raising it with hydraulic jacks.

This house will travel through city streets and across the sound to Hat Island. There, it will find a new life as another family's home. It's an awesome spectacle, the ultimate act of recycling and an emotional punch for the families connected to this home.

Dr. Bill and Katie Finley and their two children moved to 540 Alverson Blvd. four years ago for the neighborhood.

As the family's two children, Nicholas, 8, and Haley, 11, grew, the 1,400-square-foot house began to feel cramped. A den with a curtain across the door served as Nick's bedroom. The office was in the basement next to the furnace.

The Finleys looked into remodeling and learned it wasn't feasible. The only option, it seemed, was tearing down the house and rebuilding, something that had happened three times in their neighborhood in the past two years.

To the family, a teardown felt wrong and like a waste. Then they heard about a company that moves homes slated for demolition.

"Being able to recycle the house and have somebody else use it was a great alternative to having it going into the landfill," said Bill Finley, a surgeon at The Everett Clinic.

About the time the Finleys began to feel cramped, the Davis family began to dream of a get-away cottage. It didn't need to be big or fancy, just a place where Jennifer Davis, an attorney, and Craig Davis, an Everett police officer, could take their three kids, Hayden, 9, Abigail, 7, and Grace, 4, and make some memories.

The dream stayed just that, until Jennifer Davis looked, really looked, at her son hurtling toward adolescence. They needed to decide on that cottage or it wouldn't be a part of his childhood.

Then they heard you could buy an older home and have it delivered.

The little house at 540 Alverson didn't know it, but after half a century it was about to take a road trip.

'Jaw down, mouth open'

Sometimes on the way to a job, someone will eye Casjen Cramer's orange fluorescent coveralls with the orange fluorescent stripes and ask him what he does for a living.

"I'll say, 'We're house movers,' and they'll say, 'Oh, you move furniture.' And I'll say, 'No, no, we move the whole house.'"

"The reaction varies, but mostly it's jaw down, mouth open."

Cramer works for Nickel Bros., a company that specializes in moving houses and other super-sized loads. The Canada-based company opened an office in Everett in 2006, its fourth in the state.

The house on Alverson offered good bones and curb charm. Nickel Bros. agreed to buy it from the Finley family.

For Nickel Bros., Everett is ripe with opportunity: a city stocked with aging historic homes and despite the downturn in the

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Jennifer Buchanan / The Herald (click to enlarge)
The house sits on the barge as it slowly moves toward the Hat Island.



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economy, a city likely to grow, said Jeff McCord, a company sales representative. As land becomes more valuable, older homes -- especially those with waterfront views -- often become teardowns.

McCord, whose business cards read "house rescuer," believes what his company does is far better than homes crunched by bulldozers. It's hard enough, he said, to watch a street of single-family homes transition into larger new houses, condos or apartment buildings. A teardown is an extra dig and a loss of historical architectural stock, he said.

He usually buys a home for a silver dollar minted the year the house was built. A post-World War II shortage on silver, however, had him improvising on the Finleys 1950s house when he met with them in May. He handed the Finleys two 50-cent pieces and a silver dollar from another year, and pumped their hands.

In exchange, Nickel Bros. will save the couple an estimated \$15,000 in demolition costs by hauling away their home.

The complicated mechanisms of the move were under way.

In a matter of days, workers built a crib under the house. The crib holds a system of hydraulic jacks that work in unison to slowly push the house upward. Once the house is lifted, the crib acts as a support.

Two pieces of steel and a roller system allow workers to move the house off the foundation like a package off a conveyer belt.

This house is too wide to fit down the street, so workers cut away a 6-foot section of the back bedroom.

Moving it a few miles across town is perilous work that will take 2 1/2 hours and involve a couple of dozen workers, pilot cars and a police escort.

"I didn't think I was going to be nervous because it is fully insured," Jennifer Davis said. "The minute it lifted off the foundation and started floating onto the street ... I think I took a gasp when everyone else took a gasp."

The house moved at walking speed and every turn, every hill, every tree, every power line was a potential hazard. At one point, workers yelled "WHOA, WHOA, WHOA," as the house snagged a tree limb.

Workers used a tool called a skid board to lift power lines so the house could scooch underneath.

When the house made a turn from 10th Street onto Broadway, the driver of the rig had to weave around the hanging traffic signals like a frigate skirting a buoy. Temporarily moving a traffic light can cost upward of \$7,000.

The sounds and sights always draw onlookers.

"It's the magnitude and the scale," said Cramer, who oversaw the logistics of this move. "People think it's inconceivable a house could be moved. They can't believe it."

When the house arrived on Hat Island by barge a few months later, dozens of island residents turned out with lawn chairs and beer coolers to watch.

Workers built their own makeshift bridge onto shore. It was only a few miles to the house's final stop, but the workers had to negotiate a steep hill lined with trees, so steep they worried the house could slough off the back.

Cheers started as the house climbed the final hill, rocking slowly side-to-side, brushing tree branches and knocking loose leaves.

Then came a sharp crack. The flatbed stopped and workers scrambled to the back, bracing tires and assessing damage. The tree got it worse than the house.

The slow climb continued without incident. When it cleared the top, all Jennifer Davis could say was, "I'm so relieved."

A place for memories

When the Davis family decided to buy a recycled house, Jennifer Davis remembered a book from her childhood by Virginia Lee Burton, "The Little House," about a sturdy house in the countryside.

The builder of that house tells the family it's so strong, it will last for generations. Time passes and a city grows around the house. Eventually, movers lift it off its foundation and move it to a new countryside.

That house is so well built, the movers say, they could move it anywhere. Davis found a copy of the story and read it to her children.

Just before autumn arrived, the Davis family climbed into their powerboat at Dagmar's Marina and zoomed out the Snohomish River toward Hat Island.

They brought tools, a ladder and lunch. Because they have no car on the island, they pushed the tools in a jogging stroller and manhandled the ladder up the same dusty road the house took.

The house wasn't finished. The barge to the island was out of service and the family's contractor was waiting for supplies.

The siding wasn't on, the yard was churned dirt and the front door steps weren't built. Another ladder was already in the basement.

No matter. Craig and Jennifer Davis boosted the children into the house. The girls galloped to their room and began giggling and playing in a pile of pillows.

Jennifer and Craig Davis walked around the house, inspecting the work of their contractor, then boosted themselves inside to marvel at their sturdy little house.

They could imagine a hundred Saturdays here.

"I'm looking forward to spending time here with the children," Jennifer Davis said, taking in her cottage, finally home, "board games and cards and buckets and bikes and all the sorts of things you do without plugging anything in."

Andy Rathbun and Elizabeth Armstrong contributed to this story.

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