

Two families receive Habitat houses

By Luke Simcoe
of The StarPhoenix

As if being given the keys to their own Habitat for Humanity home wasn't proof enough of Saskatchewan's hospitality, Suleiman Salma's family was also handed a Tim Hortons coffee maker to go with their new digs.

The Salmas, who immigrated to Saskatoon four years ago to escape the turmoil in their native Sudan, were one of two families presented with homes at a dedication ceremony Friday at W.P. Bate Community School. The houses are located blocks away from the school on 18th Street West.

"This home will change my life and my family's life," Salma said in an emotional acceptance speech. "It will give us a chance to be part of this community."

Community is a big part of Habitat for Humanity, says Alan Funk, the board chair in Saskatoon. Habitat partners with local businesses and individuals, as well as various levels of government, to provide safe and affordable housing to families for whom home ownership is out of reach.

Once approved by the organization, successful applicants volunteer 500 hours with Habitat to help build their own home and others like it. Once the houses are complete, candidates are given the keys and an interest-free mortgage. "It's a hand up, not a handout," said Funk.

With the recent spike in housing costs in Saskatoon, the local branch of Habitat has been fielding more applications than ever. The organization has had to stop accepting applications until the new year, says office manager Sharon Prediger.

Candidates are pre-screened on the basis of need, ability to pay a mortgage and willingness to volunteer with Habitat's



—SP Photo by Peter Wilson

Suleiman Salma and his two-year-old daughter, Amani, are the proud owners of a newly built Habitat for Humanity home

construction teams. With the housing situation the way it is in Saskatoon, Prediger says if Habitat relaxed the requirements for applicants, it would be akin to "opening the floodgates."

Both Funk and Prediger said they would like more help from the provincial and municipal governments in terms of covering land costs for Habitat homes.

Conservative MP Kelly Block presented Salma with blankets, Justice Minister Don Morgan gave him a set of fire extinguishers and Saskatoon Mayor Don Atchison offered him a mailbox. "Now you can get all the bills from the city," the mayor joked.

Salma said his family — including his

wife Nawal and their four children, aged two to 11 — is excited about moving out of the small apartment they've been sharing for the past few years.

He's also looking forward to getting some rest and spending more time with his family. Salma, who holds a law degree from Sudan, drives a taxi in the city at night and many of his days have been spent fulfilling his 500-hour commitment to Habitat.

Although his new home is hardly luxurious, he says it's a big step up from the kind of house he lived in when he was in Sudan. "There's no comparison," he said with a smile.

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