Sudanese native finally feels safe in Novato home

Social worker moves into ‘green rehab’

By submitted

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Twenty-one years ago, Hanan Alabtain escaped decades of civil unrest in her native Sudan and began the long and winding road that led her to her own Marin County door. In June she moved her family into a Novato townhouse that had been completely upgraded and “greened,” through the REO Homes for the Workforce program launched by Novato’s Northbay Family Homes.

With funding arranged through the Wells Fargo Community Development Corporation, Hanan’s new home was originally purchased as an REO (bank-owned) property in January by NFH’s sister nonprofit, Suburban Alternatives Land Trust. Then the Marin Community Foundation, with assistance through Home Depot’s U.S. Communities program, provided the wherewithal to complete a green rehab of the property, making it more energy-efficient and therefore more affordable for a family to live in. Finally, with assistance from the Marin Housing Authority, which her mother is qualified to receive, Hanan purchased the improved home — and now can afford to live in it.

It was a long and complicated process, but it achieved many goals: One property was removed from the rolls of foreclosed homes. It was made “greener,” thus reducing its carbon footprint. A property joins the ranks of Novato’s affordable housing. And the home’s improved energy efficiency makes it more affordable for a family to live in, forever. SALT used funding from PGE’s sustainability program to replace the 30-year-old furnace and install energy-saving appliances, windows and insulation.

Before coming to America, Hanan lived for 12 years in England, where she trained as a computer systems engineer. Both her sons were born there, but an increasingly difficult marriage added to her fears. She felt certain that she and her boys would be safe, and would have better opportunities, if she could get to the United States.

Nine years ago, accompanied by her mother and young sons, she arrived in the Bay Area and looked for work. Despite having high-tech information technology (IT) training and a complete command of the English language, she couldn’t find work in her field. “Everything IT was going down the drain,” she said. When she finally found employment as a resident services coordinator for the Oakland Housing Authority, she was surprised to discover she loved it.

“I link residents with services and resources,” she said. “I help other agencies to provide resources for
low-income families. I’m also a certified mediator for neighbors in conflict.

“In IT you solve problems within a computer; in my job, I solve problems with people,” she said. “I love to help people.”

Hanan also had a goal for herself: to achieve the American dream by owning her own home.

Working with mainstream real estate agents, she made offer after offer on home after home — nearly 100 in all. For one reason or another, all the deals fell through.

Then, through Gayle Suits of the Marin Housing Authority, Hanan heard about Northbay Family Homes.

“Northbay Family Homes gave me much more guidance,” Hanan said. “I’m so grateful to them. After struggling with outside real estate agents for four years, working with NFH was a dream. They gave me honest advice, and I really felt safe. I was sure that whatever they told me would be right.”

Hanan had to take a Housing Authority course in responsible homeownership, and there were many other requirements to be met, but her determination and guidance from NFH helped her to achieve them.

“I encourage people who are like me to go with Northbay Family Homes because they are nonprofit. They are there to guard your interests. There is glory in buying your own home.”

For more information about Northbay Family Homes, call 382-2530 or visit the website nfh.org. For more information about the Marin Housing Authority, see the website marinhousing.org/section_8_hcv_homeownership.htm.