Onsite in El Salvador: Q&A with BHGRE’s Sherry Chris

In August 2016, Better Homes and Gardens Real Estate (BHGRE) and New Story announced their plan to join forces to build 80 homes in Ahuachapán, El Salvador.

BHGRE CEO Sherry Chris toured the new community and its completed model home in April.

While visiting, Chris was able to meet the grateful recipients of these homes — families whose lives will be forever changed because of the commitments made by BHGRE’s network.

This partnership is the first of its kind for New Story: The charity has never strategically worked with a brokerage to build one of its communities.

New Story co-founder and CEO Brett Hagler says what makes this campaign unique is the fact that BHGRE is funding the entire community; normally, only a select number of homes are funded, but BHGRE’s decision to invest in building all 80 homes is part of its vision to become a long-standing presence in Ahuachapán.

Inman sat down with Chris to learn more about her site visit and discuss the ribbon-cutting ceremony that occurred in celebration of the project.

Inman: How do you make giving a part of your company and your personal DNA?

Sherry Chris: Let’s start with BHGRE.

In developing the brand almost nine years ago as a lifestyle real estate brand with the next generation of consumers, brokers and agents in mind, I studied companies that were attracting next-gen customers.

They all had some apparent common themes — a stated set of core values, a vision to provide exceptional service as well as a commitment to giving back.

Starbucks, Whole Foods and Apple are all examples.

The giving back piece is very powerful on many levels. It allows a culturally aligned business network to connect at a deeper level.

It allows for a personal feeling of pride; we all want to make a difference.

But the most important part is how you can impact others' lives.

From a personal perspective, I have always felt strongly about the importance of giving; I have a belief that if one openly shares, the benefits will come back tenfold.

Why New Story?

In the fall of 2015, I was sitting in the audience of Inman Luxury Connect.

I was there to learn and meet up with some prospective brokers.

There was not another brand CEO in sight.

Brett Hagler from New Story was one of the speakers; I had not heard of it, and as I listened, I had an epiphany of sorts.

Partnering with a charity was on my radar, but it had to be right.

As I was sitting and listening to Brett, I had this vision of a BHGRE community with homes painted in our brand colors and our brokers and agents providing a deeper connection — gardens, furniture, training and love.

Because of our licensing agreement with Meredith Corporation, any third-party partnership had to be completely vetted — looked at from a risk prospective. What could go wrong and what would the consequences be?

Working in a third-world country is tricky and dangerous.

This was an enormous undertaking — a calculated risk — and after about nine months of working through the hurdles, we were able to make a commitment.

Many have asked: How did I know New Story would be a good partner?

My answer is: They stayed with us through the several month vetting process, they never gave up, they learned new best practices, as did we.

A lesser team could have easily walked away, but they became as determined as we were to make it work.

What are the do’s and don’ts in partnering with a charity?

The first do is to have perseverance — staying power. Do not give up. If this is what you believe will be the best charity partner for your company, do what needs to be done to make it happen.

Make sure your team is behind you.

I have the best team in the industry. They are as passionate as I am. There is nothing more focused than a culturally aligned team. Don’t launch in a vacuum.

We had a steering committee of brokers committed to making this a success before it launched.

Sell it every day. [At] every office meeting, training meeting [and] WebEx company launch, I talk about New Story.

Don’t give up.

Tell us about the site visit.

The site inspection was more powerful than I can ever describe in words.

Meeting families, visiting their current homes — mud floors, no plumbing — yet the people are spiritual and happy. And they are so thankful and grateful for their new homes.

They will create a powerful community helping each other, and they will all fulfill a dream of homeownership.

This BHGRE community will help over 500 people — 80 families — live a better life.

Many of them walked on foot to the building site; they were told I would be there.

We had a ribbon-cutting ceremony, a priest blessed the site, and everyone was treated to cookies and orange soda. Close to 200 people came.

They saw their new homes and met each other.

They wanted pictures, they wanted hugs and they wanted to say “thank you.”

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