

## HOUSING:

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make regular visits to the units during and after construction, where residents greet them as old friends.

"I believe we were so successful in our campaign for funds because donors want to see something tangible for their money," said Champagne, the effervescent overseer whom residents consider the Dom Perignon of adapted housing.

This is one project manager you won't find in a glitzy office getting construction updates on his BlackBerry. He's on site through every phase of construction offering ideas on ways to improve access and services.

After one resident mentioned he had to wait in the lobby a half hour to allow the snow and mud to dry from his wheelchair before entering his apartment, Champagne came up with an improvised wheelchair washer and dryer for the front lobby. Residents can now wheel their chairs over a grate, rinse the wheels with a specially-designed hose and dry in front of a fan.

"That's a half hour more a person in a wheelchair can spend inside his apartment with his family," Champagne said.

During another visit, Champagne noticed a resident removing a pot from the oven, which is strategically placed at wheelchair level, and remarked if the pot fell, it would scald her. The observation resulted in the addition of a rolling shelf under each oven to hold heavy pots and pans.

"I don't believe in doing study after study," Champagne said. "I prefer to study it once, then do it." "My office is in



*Han-Droits director general Gaetane Lacroix with board president Melvyn Bryant (seated) and project manager Paul Champagne.*

the corridor of a church and my desk is a piece of plywood," he said. "Not one cent goes to administration and my salary is paid by the project."

Association president Melvyn Bryant, who holds court at the local Tim Horton's, shares Champagne's philosophy. "If anyone needs to find me, they know they can also meet up with me at Tim's," Bryant said.

When the association launched its

first campaign for funds, there were 40 people on a waiting list. Those needs were met and there are presently 200 seniors and handicapped people waiting for an affordable, adapted housing unit.

Gaetane Lacroix, the association's director general is presently accepting applications from seniors and handicapped people for the next phase of construction. A panel will then assess each application and establish a priority

list based on revenue, current lodging and the level of physical needs of applicants.

In addition to the three new projects in progress in Magog, the association is working with committees in Georgeville and Potton Township to construct affordable housing units for elderly residents.

"A few years ago it wasn't feasible to think seniors with special needs would be able to remain in their own rural communities," Champagne said. But with increased focus on home care services, many elderly and handicapped people are able to live out their lives in comfort and dignity in a secure environment.

Bryant and Champagne credit much of the success of their projects to widespread community support and involvement.

"There is very good collaboration with health care agencies, corporations, committees and volunteers who want to take care of people in the community," Champagne said.

And that includes Helen Powers who is using her newfound freedom to improve the quality of life for her neighbours. "I love to cook in my new kitchen so I enjoy sending a meal across the hall to my neighbours," she said.

"If there is one word to describe what these projects mean, I would say it's 'hope'" Champagne said. "If you are an elderly or handicapped person and you realize you are losing your autonomy because you're unable to do things for yourself, it's easy to become very discouraged and fearful about your future. But with some adaptations, and a community support network, it is possible to live autonomously and securely in this kind of apartment."