



A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Tuesday, March 14, 2006 5:23 PM CST

Residents and businesses help make Christian childrens' home a reality

By Pat Hambrick

The Daily Citizen

Many children in Arkansas desperately need a place to call home, and several current and former White County residents are helping to provide just that in Soaring Wings Ranch, currently under construction in Conway.

"Lots of kids aren't getting the love, attention and affection they need — and worse, many suffer unspeakable abuse and neglect," Ross Ridout, vice-president and general counsel for Ridout Lumber of Searcy and member of Soaring Wings Ranch (SWR) Advisory Board, said.



Ross Ridout vice president and general counsel at Ridout Lumber Company stands at the door factory in Searcy Tuesday. Ridout Lumber is donating all the materials required to construct the girls' home on the Soaring Wings Ranch.

The ranch will provide a Christian home for non-delinquent children in Arkansas who have been abused, neglected or orphaned — either by death or by incarceration of their parents — and will be an alternative to foster care.

Soaring Wings Ranch will provide individual homes, with up to eight children per home, on a 195-acre site that will include a lake, chapel and learning center. Children will be provided counseling and an equestrian program that will coincide with the counseling program, said Andrew Watson, executive director of SWR.

Each set of house parents will attend the church of their choice with the children, and the children will attend Greenbrier Public Schools, where they will be involved in sports programs and after-school activities such as Boy or Girl Scouts, Watson said.

"This is a home," Watson stressed. "It's the next best thing to having kids with their biological parents. The house parents will teach the children a work ethic and teach them to love people, animals and nature."

Watson hopes the first homes will be completed by Christmas 2006, with space for eight boys and eight girls.

Ridout Lumber is donating all the materials required to construct the girls' home on the ranch. Delk Construction of Bald Knob is donating the material for the food and clothing center. Beverly Strain-Eads, who lives in Florida but owns property in Greenbrier, has provided \$350,000 to construct the boys' home.

Eventually, Watson said 80 children will be housed at SWR.

Watson, a Bald Knob High School graduate, said working in juvenile probation in Conway provided the catalyst for SWR.

"I realized most of them were not bad kids. They just needed a positive, Christian environment to grow up in. I knew their outcome would be a lot different if they had that," Watson said.

Watson began an internship in 1997 that turned into a case-worker position at Community Service Inc. in Conway and began to see that many of the problems the children faced would be best dealt with if they were removed from the environment they were in and given a positive, Christian home. The dream of SWR was born.

Watson received his Bachelor's degree in Sociology from University of Central Arkansas in Conway and later attended Mid-America Seminary, where he received his Master's Degree in Christian Education, with emphasis in students. He and his wife, Marla, were given an opportunity to serve as relief house parents at Big Oak Ranch in Gadsden, Ala. They gained the experience and knowledge they needed to start SWR, which is modeled after Big Oak Ranch, he said.

Watson said he formed a board of directors and they started with less than \$1,000.

"We had no land, no home, nothing. We had a dream," he said.

After several months, he located the land and was able to make the \$30,000 down payment and had 18 months to raise an additional \$400,000. With a month to go on the deadline, he still needed \$217,000. A week from closing, he needed \$150,000. With one day to go before losing the down payment, he said he still needed \$15,000, and a donor called.

"I was praying for the campus the whole time," he said.

He said Ridout and Delk had committed to building the girls' home and the food and clothing center before the land was purchased. It took almost \$500,000 in donations to create the infrastructure for the property — water and power lines and almost two miles of roads.

To date, Watson said approximately \$1.7 million in cash, materials and labor has been donated for capital costs.

SWR has been able to buy land and do the construction debt-free, and the goal is to remain debt-free while building up to 10 homes. God has opened doors at every turn, Watson said.

Ridout said that he has grown even more convinced that it was right to become involved in SWR.

“It’s a unique opportunity to directly help children, and SWR is particularly unique because of the setting — each home is like a family,” Ridout said. “It’s a stable environment, a Christian environment.”

Ridout said that he has spent a lot of time working with children in various ways, including Special Olympics and coaching.

“As a coach and as a dad, kids are something I have a passion about,” Ridout said. “[Ridout Lumber] gets so many opportunities to do things, and we have to be careful or too many are related to sports or youth activities. Those things are a privilege for a child. Soaring Wings is an opportunity to help with basic needs.”

Ridout said there is a huge need in Arkansas for SWR and that many people don’t recognize how many children are growing up in homes where they are not wanted or in homes where parents are unwilling or unable to properly care for their children, whether because of drug use or other problems.

“Those children will be better off in a good, Christian environment,” he said.

Watson said White County has a great need to provide a place for abused and neglected children because of the serious problem with drugs, including methamphetamine in this county, and that he is grateful that so many White County people are involved in SWR.

Because of the emphasis on a Christian environment, both Ridout and Watson said SWR will have to depend on individuals, churches, corporations and private foundations for funding.

“I want more people involved from this area,” Watson said.

Former Searcy resident Matt Jones is chair of the board. Local advisory committee members include Ridout, John Rutledge, Dr. Brad White, Jack Delk, Angie and Jackie Stevens and Joey Wiggins.

“Kids cannot help themselves. They have no control over their lives,” Ridout said.

For more information, visit the website at www.soaringwingsranch.com