

OTOW resident Carl Hebinck has a dream

By John Koning

Carl Hebinck is an educator, inventor and entrepreneur. Most notably though, this 80-year-old Florentine Way resident is a tireless humanitarian with a very big dream.

Carl's big dream, ironically, is taking shape in the tiny impoverished nation of Haiti, located less than 700 miles south-east of Key West.

Carl and his lovely wife, Julia, have dedicated their lives to helping the roughly 10 million Haitians who are part of "The Bottom Billion," a name coined by author Paul Collier in his book of the same name. It's the name given to the desperately poor of our world who have no realistic hope of betterment. The book is a recommended read for those of us who are so richly blessed.

Carl and Julia met in Manaus, Amazonas, South America, 40 years ago when Carl was a missionary, hospitalized for 40 days with malaria, hepatitis and typhoid.

Julia stumbled onto his room in search of someone else and, in the short time she took to explain her presence, Carl fell head over heels in love.

Julia later mentioned to her parents that she had met a nice American, but she was afraid he wouldn't recover. In a way she was right. Carl beat the malaria, the hepatitis and the typhoid, but he never recovered from Julia's smile.

Carl's big dream is to replace every Haitian slum shanty with a safe, modest, modular home in its original location, each one within a day, and without displacing the home's family.

Sounds crazy, doesn't it?

Well, actually, if you take the time to study it closely, this is a fiscally sound plan that has been engineered and painstakingly researched for long term sustainability.

There is plenty of documentation to back up Carl's dream. After all, this is no flighty idea guy. He is a pragmatic and persistent techno-sleuth who owns two patents for energy efficient construction systems and their affiliated specialty tools. He has built more than 300 modular homes using his ThermoBuilt™ system in this country and others.

After examining the statistical data following the 2010 Haiti's earthquake that claimed the lives of 220,000 men, women and children, Carl discovered that most fatalities and injuries were



Carl Hebinck explains his very big dream. (Photo by John Koning)

caused by crumbling concrete and heavy building materials. He is convinced that most of the deaths and injuries would have been avoided if lightweight, ultra strong building materials had been used.

Carl tells of an older sister who threw her body over that of her baby brother to protect him from the crumbling concrete. She succeeded in saving her brother's life, but she suffered a broken back in so doing.

After hearing her story, Chicago real estate developer and non-profit developer of affordable homes, John Iberle, donated two modular homes to that brave young woman and another needy family, and Carl traveled to Haiti to help construct them.

Carl is no lone wolf stumbling blindly into this dream. He, along with Bruce Goddard and volunteer modular home builder, Chris Kavala, head up an organization called Affordable Housing for Haiti. It is a humanitarian organization working under a non-governmental organization (NGO) already on the ground there. Their mandate is to provide permanent and efficient housing for Haitians.

Even though Carl owns the rights to his own modular housing systems, he recommended to his partners that they use a structural insulated panel, or SIP system, that he sees as better suited to building strong, inexpensive homes in Haiti.

When Carl calls a home strong, he means that it will flex like an aircraft wing and not crumble, even during an earthquake of 8.3 on the Richter Scale. That's 13 times more powerful than the 7.0 Haitian earthquake of 2010. He also means it won't blow away like a beach umbrella during a hurricane packing 190 mph winds. That's because the spikes used to anchor the roof will resist 645 pounds of up-lift each. They are placed every six inches – 120 of them in all.

You can do the math on that one. These figures are not hypothetical. They are tried and tested performance benchmarks.

When Carl calls a home inexpensive, he means it will cost roughly \$15 per square foot. That is 53 percent cheaper than cinder-block, the traditional building material used in Haiti.

Most cinder-blocks used for homes and offices are manufactured and dried in the Haitian sun, using round, unwashed sand instead of sharp aggregate. The resulting structures are



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by John Koning



A demonstration of the strength of a modular home panel.

unreliable and potentially dangerous to their inhabitants. It makes economical and moral sense to use a cheaper, lighter and more sanitary product.

Carl and his partners have conceived a manufacturing facility that will be capable of producing 22 homes per day.

In order for Carl's dream to become reality, he and his partners must fund it, build it, and staff it in Haiti at an estimated expense of a little less than \$1 million. When compared to the cost of shipping the modular sections from elsewhere, it is an absolute bargain. Carl gives us the math on this

one:

The cost to ship a container from the US to Haiti is roughly \$7,500 including tariffs, whether it contains a few dozen finished house panels or several tons of the raw materials required to produce them.

When you consider that the plastic beads used to make the expanded polystyrene panels expand 50 times their original size when steam heated, you begin to see the value of shipping the raw materials and manufacturing on site. One single container of raw materials in the Haitian plant can produce enough homes to save \$1 million in freight and tariffs over the cost of importing manufactured panels. That's the cost of the factory returned, just like that.

There is an even more poignant reason to set up shop in Haiti, and that is what Carl calls the trickle up effect. Every factory, large or small, needs a support system and that system needs people to make it function.

In a mountainous and 98 percent deforested country like Haiti, jobs mean life. The people of Haiti don't need handouts. They need jobs. It's the same idea as giving people fish versus teaching them how to fish for themselves.

The profits realized by the sale of safe and efficient buildings to government agencies, other NGOs and wealthy Haitians will be used to subsidize safe, modest homes for the most vulnerable of Haiti's population.

Carl and his daughter, Lucy, traveled to Haiti to assist survivors of the devastating 2010 earthquake. That is where Carl's dream intersected with that of another dreamer, Passionist Priest, Father Rick Frechette. He is the winner of the 2012 Opus Prize for faith-based social innovation, and he leads an army of volunteers that includes big-hearted Hollywood actor Sean Penn.

Father Rick first ventured to Haiti over 25 years ago to build orphanages. He quickly recognized the need for physicians and medical facilities, so he went to school and became a doctor in his mid-40s. Since then, hundreds of thousands of Haitian lives have been saved through his skills and hospitals.

Now the way is paved for these two dreamers to join forces.

Recently, Carl's sister passed away and left him a Lincoln Towncar in her will. Instead of keeping it, he sold it.

Why?

Because the \$13,500 he got for the car will build 14 SIP houses in Haiti.

"Why do I need another car?" Carl asks.

Fellow dreamer, Walt Disney, has these words for Carl, his humanitarian friends, and any of us who dream of a better world:

"All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them."

If Carl's story has inspired you to help desperately needy Haitians, visit www.stlukehaiti.org to learn what you can do.



Carl Hebinck and John Iberle teach Haitians how to construct a modular home.