

Earth Mover

Natural Home salutes Robert Young, who builds safe, sustainable housing for Native Americans.

ROBERT O. YOUNG



Photo courtesy Volvo for Life



What does the world need, another t-shirt or a decent home? That was the question Seattle clothing manufacturer Robert Young asked himself a decade ago. On a

sales trip, he read a newspaper report about the number of elderly tribal members who freeze to death each winter—either because they're homeless or they live in uninsulated reservation dwellings. Appalled, Young founded Red Feather Development Group, a nonprofit organization that helps Native Americans learn how to build energy efficient straw bale homes.

Headquartered in Bozeman, Montana, Red Feather collaborates with the Crow, Northern Cheyenne, and Chippewa nations—and other tribes nationwide—to assist reservations with planning and building sustainable communities. “Before I spent time on reservations, I didn’t realize the bone-crunching, Third World poverty that faces these people,” Young admits. Of the 2 million tribal members who live on U.S. reservations, more than 300,000 are homeless or live in substandard conditions. Those lucky enough to have a roof over their heads often share a dilapidated shack or trailer with a dozen or more family members.

Straw bale housing is a good solution, but it’s not easy. “The bureaucracy is mind-numbing,” Young laments. “To build a home we have to deal with at least six government agencies.

Jumping through all these hoops and hurdles paralyzes community members, who feel they’re already set up for failure.”

With every building project, however, more people gain hope. One resounding success is the Crow Nation Community Study Hall, a straw bale structure where kids can do homework and use computers. The project was spearheaded by four middle-school girls who call themselves The Rez Protectors. For a school science project, they conducted experiments on a Red Feather-built house to prove that straw structures are waterproof, fire resistant, and insulated to withstand the northern Plains’ temperature extremes. The girls’ project won the Bayer/National Science Foundation competition, and they used the \$25,000 to fund the straw bale community building. That project’s money more than doubled when Red Feather received the Oprah Winfrey “Use Your Life” award. A \$50,000 prize from Volvo for Life last year also supports the building projects.

Alternative construction wasn’t an immediate hit with tribe members, who were suspicious that straw houses were just another form of substandard housing. “Once the stucco covers the bales and people walk through a cool house on a 120-degree day, most start asking, ‘How do I build one?’” says Young.

In winter, Red Feather teaches straw bale seminars on reservations so tribes become self-sufficient in their building skills. In sum-

mer, tribal members work alongside Red Feather volunteers to erect the homes and community centers they’ve helped plan. “Straw building is simple and not intimidating,” says Young. “It unites people and helps communities heal.”

Working on remote reservations is a far cry from the chic garment industry, but Young has never looked back. “What I’m doing now helps break the cycle of homelessness,” he says. “This project reminds us the world can change for the better.”

To donate to or volunteer for Red Feather’s American Indian Sustainable Housing Initiative Program, call (406) 585-7188 or check RedFeather.org.

—Laurel Kallenbach

In every issue we will honor Earth Movers, people who are making grass roots efforts to change their neighborhoods and communities for the better. To nominate someone, send information to earthmovers@naturalhomemag.com or *Natural Home Earth Mover*, 201 East Fourth St., Loveland, CO 80537. Each winner receives an engraved stone from *Natural Home* and a handmade Peruvian pottery bowl, courtesy of Ten Thousand Villages, (717) 859-8100, TenThousandVillages.com.

