In 1989, few of us on Orcas Island had heard of a "community land trust." Now, 25 years later, it’s hard to imagine what our community would be like without the stable supply of affordable housing created through OPAL (which, incidentally, stands for "Of People And Land") Community Land Trust.

Thanks to the vision of OPAL’s founders, the encouragement and ongoing generosity of Orcas residents, and many years of hard work by many hands, a thriving island resource has been created that benefits all of us. And because the housing that’s created is permanently affordable, the benefits to the community are immediate and lasting.

OPAL’s original goal still drives its efforts today: To sustain a healthy community with a mix of people earning a broad range of incomes. How? By making sure that Orcas has a permanent supply of housing that folks who earn island wages can afford – so they can put down roots, work, play, raise their families and grow old here – generation after generation.

And that’s good for you and every other islander. Work that is essential to the island gets done. Children grow up in stable neighborhoods. Employers have a reliable labor pool. Local businesses prosper. And the island’s unique culture and way of life are preserved.
A Few Facts That May Surprise YOU

- OPAL’s work on Orcas is recognized nationally. OPAL is a leader in its field, introducing innovations that have been adopted around the country. OPAL staff are respected mentors and teachers for other community land trusts.

- In its first 25 years, OPAL projects have attracted $8,115,000 in state and federal funds, bolstering the island economy, providing jobs and supporting local businesses.

- Annually, OPAL neighborhoods and apartments are home to 10 to 15 percent of Orcas school-age children. Local schools have graduated 61 OPAL students in the past 25 years.

- Last year OPAL homeowners paid $109,288 in real estate taxes.

- 337 islanders currently live in OPAL houses and apartments. Ages range from 6 months to 94 years. Length of residency on Orcas for the adults: 3 to 44 years.

- Housing in San Juan County is consistently the least affordable in the state. Last year, first-time homebuyers countywide had only 48.8 percent of the income needed to buy a house.


- On average, 17 percent of the cost of an OPAL project is paid for with private donations. The balance is paid for with homeowner mortgages (63 percent) and government grants (21 percent).

- Families with kids, the small business owner, the carpenter who repaired your roof and the guy who fixed your car … we’re all the same and all want that same American dream … homeownership. Without OPAL we simply wouldn’t be able to afford that dream, much less the dream of living in this amazing community we call home.”

Island demographics are changing (and it’s a little scary). With each new decade, there are more and more older people on Orcas and fewer and fewer younger people. And that puts the island at risk. To remain a viable, vital community we need a mix of ages, of incomes, of abilities.

Affordable housing clearly helps offset our island’s aging demographics. OPAL’s work promotes age and income diversity, and diversity is key to the long-term health and sustainability of our community.

Here’s one striking set of facts on median age:

- 37.3 – Everyone living in Washington State
- 55.3 – Folks living on Orcas
- 31.1 – Those living in OPAL houses and apartments

We all need the people who live in OPAL houses and apartments to support and enrich our lives. They perform essential services – services all of us depend on every day. OPAL residents are nurses and healthcare providers, builders, restaurant staff, grocery store employees, shopkeepers, teachers, office staff, home maintenance folks and small business owners. Our island community can’t operate – and wouldn’t be the same – without them.

It keeps us whole. San Juan County consistently has the lowest wages and the highest housing costs in the state. This disparity makes it extremely difficult for working families to put down roots. OPAL Community Land Trust is a grassroots, homegrown answer – by islanders, for islanders – to the persistent problem of affordability. Having access to affordable housing is what makes it possible for families to stay and be part of this remarkable community.