

Surviving to Thriving

Rylee's journey to Kidder Way and the quiet power of housing stability

For Rylee Heppe, housing has never simply meant four walls and a roof. It has meant uncertainty. It has meant packing up and wondering how long “home” would last.

Growing up in Arizona, Rylee's family moved often. When her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and couldn't work, they were evicted from their childhood home.

From there, it was rental to rental — never fully settled, never fully secure. Even when Rylee came to Orcas Island as a child with her grandparents during her mom's treatment, stability felt temporary. She learned early that housing could change without warning.

As an adult, that same pattern followed her.

After high school, Rylee returned to Orcas Island determined to build



Rylee and Theo share a joyful thumbs-up in front of their new Kidder Way home, celebrating a future they can call their own.

a life. Many recognize her as the friendly face behind the counter at Island Hardware where she helps neighbors and contractors find what they need.

Before finding her current rental, she lived in a travel trailer near North Beach. “It was fine at first,” she said. “But after I had Theo, it kept getting smaller and smaller.” Cold winters, tight quarters and limited amenities made daily life

especially challenging as a new mother.

Even in her rental, there were compromises: no oven, no full stove, minimal storage. And always, the quiet anxiety that the landlord might sell. “You never really relax,” she explained. “You're always thinking — how long can we stay?” That constant question is the weight of housing insecurity. And it is exactly what Kidder Way will resolve.

Rylee's Kidder Way condominium opens a bright new chapter.

For the first time, she and her young family will have stable, affordable homeownership. Her mortgage will be comparable to her rent — but instead of uncertainty, she will build equity. Instead of fearing displacement, she can plan for the next decade.

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Site Work is Underway at Pea Patch Community Campus!

The unified social services hub meets critical needs for food, shelter and wellbeing.

With the buds and blooms of spring, Pea Patch Community Campus is also coming alive! Site work has begun and **construction**

of the 20 new rental townhomes is scheduled for late summer.

The campaign to build Pea Patch is gaining momentum with more

than \$32M raised to date and just shy of \$8M remaining to complete the whole 11-acre campus.

On January 24, more than 140 people of all ages walked onto Pea Patch campus to turn the ground and mark our transition into construction.

Rep. Debra Lekanoff was there to share her support:

“This campus is for the community and you, the community, are creating it beautifully. I’ve championed this project – made it my top priority last session and again this year. I believe in you and how Pea Patch will help your community to thrive for generations.”

Thanks to all of you who are supporting this key project! **For more information and to learn how you can get involved, reach out to suzanne@opalclt.org.**



A delegation of Pea Patch supporters traveled to Olympia in January to advocate for project funding and tell their personal stories. From L-R: Deborah Sparks, Heather Stansbury, Suzanne Olson, Brita Brahce, Bob Morris, Bella Evans, Amanda Sparks and Linda Ellsworth.

Caring for People and Land: Bartel Road Forest

OPAL’s Bartel Road property is home to an “ecologically valuable” forest with many old growth trees born one or two centuries ago. The trees provide “habitat for birds, small mammals and insects,” filter the air and absorb carbon emissions.

To guide stewardship activities and future housing development on the property, OPAL engaged Rain Shadow Consulting to conduct

a forest health assessment. Trees presenting potential hazards for adjacent properties were identified and those rated high risk were immediately removed.

Alternative scenarios were created, suggesting ways to develop housing while preserving as many old growth trees as possible. Rain Shadow also calculated the amount of carbon the forest currently captures, with an

eye toward maintaining that level as housing is built.

This information will help shape plans for Bartel Road as OPAL balances the values of affordable housing and forest resilience.

Stewardship – caring for people and land – is OPAL’s legacy for the future.



Modular, eco-friendly residences will serve larger island families.



LEGEND:
■ New OPAL Homes
■ Existing OPAL Homes
■ Existing HFI Homes

Lydia Lane:

Five Single-Family Homes to be Built by Year End

OPAL will soon begin its first new single-family home construction since 2010 – five three-bedroom, two-bath houses on five lots purchased in 2020 on Lydia Lane near Rosario.

Most of the funding is already in place, thanks to state and county grants totaling \$1,875,000. The modular, eco-friendly residences, designed by Environmental Works to serve larger island families, will be built in Lynden by West Coast Homes.

“By using modular construction, we can deliver a quality product, speed up delivery, lessen disruption to the existing neighborhood and reduce demands on OPAL staff time,” explained Lisa Byers, executive director.

When it’s completed, the Lydia Lane neighborhood, originally developed

by Homes for Islanders (HFI), will have nine OPAL homes and five homes built/owned under HFI’s self-build program. There are 49 households in OPAL’s applicant pool with 11 prequalified to buy.

“We’re more than 90% of the way there,” said Lisa. **A final \$250,000 is needed for work to begin in July. For more information or to contribute to this effort, contact lisa@opalclt.org.**

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“I won’t have to worry about someone selling the house and telling us to get out, that fear goes away.”

Housing stability also reshapes childhood. Theo will have his own room. He’ll live near school, near friends, near the rhythms of island life. Rylee can hang art, plant in the yard, and settle in without hesitation.

Without her Kidder Way home, Rylee believes she may have been forced to leave the island and give up raising her child in her home community. That’s the power of housing stability. It doesn’t just house a family. It keeps a worker in the workforce, a child in the school and a neighbor in the community.

For Rylee and Theo, Kidder Way means something beautifully simple: they can stay as long as they want.



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IN THIS ISSUE

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You're invited to OPAL's Annual Meeting!

Thursday, April 23 · 5:00-6:30 PM · Emmanuel Episcopal Parish Hall
Join us for updates, celebration, and a look ahead at what's next for OPAL.

Welcome Lily Goldberg to OPAL

OPAL is pleased to welcome Lily Goldberg as our new Associate Homeownership Director. Lily joined the team in January and brings extensive experience in affordable housing and community development. She lives on San Juan Island and previously served as Director of Housing at the San Juan Community Home Trust.

Originally from Philadelphia, Lily earned her degree in Urban Studies & Community Development from Temple University and has worked with affordable housing nonprofits throughout her career. In 2015,

she biked 4,200 miles across the country, stopping to volunteer on affordable housing construction sites – an experience that reflects her deep commitment to housing access.

This new position is part of OPAL's succession planning as longtime staff, including Housing Director Julie Brunner (24 years), anticipate retirement beginning in 2028 and later. Lily's early addition to the team ensures thoughtful transition, continuity, and strong leadership for OPAL's homeownership program well into the future.



Lily brings deep experience, steady leadership and a lifelong commitment to affordable housing.

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