



by **Samantha Buford**

TEACHER TAPS INTO COMMUNITY

to Change Perceptions and Build New Markets

Ask a group of students from Chester County High School in Henderson, Tenn. a month ago about their overall perception of manufactured housing and you would have heard these responses:

“... affordable living, but they all look alike,”

“Small, cramped inside, sparse furniture, and little acreage,”

“They seem like they would be hard to build and a pain to put together,”

“I think they are okay as long as they are large and have plenty of room.”

But, what happens when you take one teacher, combine her own positive personal experience purchasing and living in a manufactured home, and add a home design class? The result is a field trip to The Home Center (a local manufactured and modular home retail sales center) that is changing attitudes and creating powerful word-of-mouth advertising.

Andrea Tyson is a seasoned educator, with a broad background in teaching. Originally a home economics teacher, then a biology teacher, next a junior-high English teacher, she now has come back to the modern equivalent of home economics. Tyson teaches two housing classes, a technology course, child devel-

opment, and “Marriage and the Family” at Chester County High School, with a population of about 600 students. After investing in a manufactured home from The Home Center’s Chester County location, a light bulb went off in Tyson’s head. Why not incorporate manufactured housing into her design course?

A Field Trip is Born

When asked what prompted the notion of taking a group of 34 high school students to The Home Center, Tyson replied, “The availability of manufactured housing and seeing the need for quality homes here. There is so much area here in Henderson for nice developments and subdivisions, like the one I live in. Then a lot of the students have land that they could build on.”

Tyson cares about her students. You can hear it when she speaks of the need for students to develop an awareness of

what manufactured housing really is, and the high standards that the industry is held to. “I hear a lot of young people that are going out into the ‘real world’ and I can see this can be an answer for them instead of renting,” she adds. This passion for teaching and the positive experiences that she has had with manufactured home living culminated in the idea of merging the two in her classroom.

Chipping Away at Perceptions

The old notions of manufactured homes as “trailers” is, unfortunately, still alive and well, but Tyson has made it a point to expose her students to the many options that manufactured housing allows for, as well as to educate them with regards to the processes of building, purchasing, designing, and living in a manufactured home.

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“I think that people have closed minds and preconceived notions that maybe the quality is not as good or that it’s going to blow away in a storm, so I’m one that wants to change that,” Tyson noted. An advocate for manufactured home living, she resides in a manufactured home community with manicured lawns, brick foundations, sidewalks, driveways, and a lake (where neighbors frequently meet up on their daily walks). She strives to impart to her students the knowledge of the vast array of homes that are available and the many options that potential owners can opt for, all the while stressing that site-built homes can have drawbacks, too. She relates her experience in Jackson, Tenn., when tornadoes were ripping through the area on the very day that she and her husband were to finalize the purchase of their

home site. Fortunately, the only thing that they lost was the grass seed on the lawn, while many site-built homes “went with the wind.” Laughing, she remarked, “If a tornado is going to hit, it’s going to hit. It’s trying to re-educate folks.”

The Re-Education of Students

This is the second year that Tyson has brought her design class on this field trip to The Home Center. The semester begins with principles of design and providing ideas. There is book work and application of the principles of design. This entails finding designs and then applying the principles of design to a house plan that students are supplied with in the final six weeks of class. (There are four plans that are furnished by The Home Center.) Students design a home for a hypothetical family of four—including a boy under one, and a girl under five—that has hired them to design the interior of their home. Next, students

look through books and find the furniture that they want to use. Tyson then makes copies of these and students do their color designing. Students “furnish” their home with pictures that they have taken on another field trip to local furniture manufacturer, Henco Furniture.

The culminating event of this project is a field trip to The Home Center. Students have already been exposed to home prices, furnishings, and design. What they experience when they go to The Home Center is eye-opening. Students realize that they can afford a home that has options, and can be customized to meet their needs. At this point, “their jaws drop, when we take them in they just can’t believe it, and they love the homes. It is fun to see the surprised looks on their faces, and see that they are pleased with what manufactured homes have to offer,” Tyson stated.

The Home Center

The Home Center is owned and operated out of two locations—Lexington and Henderson, Tenn. Charles and Alan Youngerman have been in business since 1970. Concentrating on customer satisfaction with an experienced staff is what has led to the success of The Home Center, and what inevitably led to Tyson’s desire to bring her classes to the retail sales center. They welcomed the visit, and are “proud to have hosted this tour,” says Jessica Wesson, of The Home Center.

Other manufactured home retailers can easily tap into this type of re-education and innovative approach to changing attitudes and public perceptions. It was fairly simple for Tyson to set up...she spoke with members of the staff at The Home Center, made a date, and included four of The Home Center’s floor plans in her lessons. Plans for the future of Tyson’s Home Design class include the incorporation of a display home on the site of The Home Center that the class can decorate and display. The Home Center is also trying to unite with Chester

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County High School to embed the trip into the school's curriculum.

Ask a group of students from Chester County High School what they think now of manufactured housing and it's clear that a little bit of exposure to the unfamiliar goes a long way in breaking down stereotypes and long-held beliefs.

"I like them even more than I thought I would"

– Sarah R.

"I thought that they were going to be ugly and little, but they are pretty and big"

– Ruddy S.

"I am very impressed. I like the bathrooms and the kitchen, the living room and especially the bath tub"

– Rebecca P.

"I don't view them as "trailers" anymore"

– Ashley S.

"They are a lot nicer and more like a real home than the way I thought"

– Lacy K.

So What?

So why should retailers and manufacturers care about Chester Co., Tenn., Andrea Tyson, and The Home Center? Simple: Community, Consumer, and Connections.

Community: By integrating themselves in the educational community, The Home Center is creating positive word-of-mouth testimonials and changing attitudes. What better way to create a positive community impression of your business than to reach out to local schools and assist them? Community members love to see businesses get behind their educational systems. Outreach can be as simple as giving the schools pens and pencils with your business name and number, or as elaborate as joining together with the school to create a "family fun day" at your business. You are bringing customers

through the door with a positive outlook from the start!

Consumer: With all of the advertising geared at teens and young adults, this is a market that can be tapped into directly by going into the school environment. Utilize the power within your own community's educational system to create future homebuyers for your industry. There is no better way to break miscon-

ceptions than through education!

Connections: Andrea Tyson's idea has created a tremendous amount of positive press for The Home Center. Use the connections within your community to branch out of your normal marketing efforts to reach new and non-traditional markets. A simple, yet effective, idea unleashes new potential and new opportunities. ■




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