

## Grid Alternatives Provides Low-Income Solar Options

Marvas McCladdie always dreamed of buying a home, but with the high cost of housing in Northern California's Bay Area and rising energy prices driving up the cost of living, he never thought it would be possible. He tried saving for the down payment and closing costs with little success: A single father raising two teenage girls, Marvas often worked extra shifts at his job as a cook at the local hospital just to make ends meet.

Just as he was about to give up on the idea, he learned that his application for Habitat for Humanity had been approved. In 2007, after putting more than 500 hours of sweat equity into the construction, Marvas and his daughters moved from a cramped apartment to a three-bedroom house, made possible by a 30-year, no-interest mortgage through Habitat for Humanity.

Marvas's home is one of 26 built on a reclaimed industrial site in the Sobrante Park neighborhood of East Oakland. In keeping with Habitat's emphasis on green building, each home comes

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equipped with a roof-mounted 2-kilowatt solar-electric system from Grid Alternatives, an Oakland-based nonprofit group providing low-income families with the benefits of solar power.

Founded in 2001 during California's energy crisis, Grid Alternatives is the brainchild of Erica Mackie and Tim Sears—two engineers who previously worked with energy efficiency and renewable energy systems in the private sector. After seeing how rising energy prices practically crippled low-income households, the duo set out to create a program to help low-income communities throughout California access the benefits of solar power.

"Low-income homeowners spend a higher percentage of their incomes on energy. Consequently, they are the hardest-hit by high energy prices. They pay into the tax system that supports rebates and incentives, but most cannot afford the up-front capital investment, and miss out on the benefits of renewable energy," Sears says. "Our goal was to make the economics work for *everyone*."



Courtesy www.gridalternatives.org

**Marvas McCladdie and his daughter, Camille.**



Courtesy www.habitat.org

Their efforts led to two programs: the Solar Affordable Housing Program, which trains and leads teams of volunteers to install solar-electric systems for low-income homeowners, and the Energy Efficiency Team Program, which installs energy-efficiency upgrades for low-income seniors and disabled persons. The programs' success led to the company's current partnership with Habitat for Humanity.

Since 2004, Grid Alternatives has helped Habitat for Humanity provide more than 165 families with solar-electric systems and, in the process, trained more than 2,000 volunteers in solar-electric installation. Habitat for Humanity coordinates the grants, and funding from participating utilities and rebates through the California Energy Commission cover the cost of the systems. The Grid Alternatives crew takes the lead on system design, procurement, and installation.

In the Sobrante project, each system is designed to reduce a family's electric bills by approximately 75%, resulting in more than \$15,000 in savings over its expected 30-year lifetime. But for Marvas, the benefits go beyond the monthly savings. "My girls ask lots of questions. It's nice to see them genuinely excited to learn more about renewable energy and understand how it all works," he says. "I am sure they will take this with them into the future."

—Kelly Davidson

Another 28 solar-powered Habitat houses are planned for an adjoining site in Marvas's neighborhood. To learn more or lend a helping hand, log on to [www.gridalternatives.org](http://www.gridalternatives.org).