

## EarthCraft Virginia “Visionary Award” Remarks

T.K. Somanath 3/28/13

I am humbled and honored to receive this year's Sustainable Leadership Award.

I am also very happy that my wife, Muktha, my son, Bharat, and daughter, Rupa, and my three grandsons Nicholas, Milind and Madin are here to celebrate this event!

I am reminded of a quote from our holy scripture Vedas, "Vasudiva Kutambikau": Treat all beings on this planet as your own family.

In the recent past, we bore witness to massive natural disasters and human tragedies, as almost a score of unchecked wildfires -- some of truly gigantic dimensions -- exploded thru natural habitats and human neighborhoods over nine western states.

Recent devastation and human misery to millions caused by hurricanes in the Gulf and East Coast are fresh in our memories.

The determined, exhausted faces of firefighters, early responders -- professional and volunteer alike -- intermingled with shell-shocked evacuees, reinforce our realization that man's best efforts are often barely enough to scratch the surface in these dramatic struggles.

Such pressures have taken their toll, both on nature and our state of mind. Decades of misguided policy on forest and land management, along with weather that seems to grow hotter and drier with each passing season, plus the choices we all make that, in one form or another, put us in harm's way, seem to have set the stage for an era of catastrophe.

There are times when a feeling of helplessness is so overwhelming that it seems to be all we have left. Nature will have her way. And the road we travel toward wisdom and understanding is not an easy one. We find ourselves stopping to ask, "How do we even know where to start in making our world a more sustainable place?"

The leadership to address this challenge has to ultimately come from within.

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach.

EarthCraft has been an incredible conduit and resource in this mending process.

At the Better Housing Coalition 15 years ago, Karl Bren served on our Board. At a time when the “green” we needed the most was money to build affordable housing, Karl got us thinking about an entirely different notion of green, and he introduced us later to EarthCraft.

The many practices we launched allow us to operate and develop our communities in a more sustainable way. We are indebted to Karl for his guidance and inspiration.

Most of you have used or are thinking about using the innovative and effective policies that the Better Housing Coalition uses to conserve resources, pollution and carbon footprints.

For us, this includes:

- Recycling -- paper, carpet and construction waste.
- Pro-active building and housing design
- Recycled construction materials for wood, concrete and carpet
- Life cycle thinking.
- Use of local resources and jobs.
- Slow and steady growth committed to practicing in socially and environmentally beneficial ways.
- Habitat and wildlife preservation
- Certified sourcing standards
- Building infill housing and low-impact historic preservation
- Cutting waste -- no landfill waste, no hazardous waste, no VOC emissions, and
- Practicing and teaching conservation

Early on, we learned that building sustainable, affordable housing didn't just have an impact on the environment. It made a huge difference in the quality of life of our residents.

For example, the 700 seniors in our eight seniors' communities have an average income of \$11,600. They can hardly squeeze a nickel out of their monthly budgets.

By making their homes energy efficient, we have seen utility bills drop by 75 percent or more in many cases. This means they don't have to choose between food or medicine. They can buy birthday presents for their grandchildren. They can afford to go a movie once in a while.

In 2006, we committed to being an EarthCraft builder. All of the single-family homes we build or rehabilitate are EarthCraft-certified. We sell to first-time buyers, most of whom have incomes at or below 80% of the Average Median Income. They are the teachers, preachers, social workers, firefighters and healthcare workers in our community.

The expense of owning an EarthCraft-certified home – outside of mortgages and taxes – costs less over time because of reduced utility bills and home maintenance expenses. I wish my home had been built with Hardie-plank siding when we bought it 30 years ago – I would have saved a lot of money!

The affordable housing crisis in our area is real. Between our aging Baby Boomers and our eroding middle class, tens of thousands of our fellow Richmonders are forced to live in unsafe neighborhoods and unhealthy homes.

This is not the Richmond I want for my grandsons. It's imperative that we continue to develop sustainably. It's the least we can do to mend the part of the world that's in our reach.

Again, I thank you for this honor.