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Hurricanes won't blow these houses down

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by [Kirstin Dorsch](#)

Staff writer



Special Poured concrete walls like the ones on this Benchmark Home in Marsh Landing can withstand winds up to 140 miles per hour, said Ken Krantz, owner of Safewall Concrete Systems

JACKSONVILLE -- Ken Krantz is an ambitious man.



The owner of Orange Park-based cast-in-place concrete wall builder [Safewall Concrete Systems LLC](#) has plans to build homes in Jacksonville that will be able to withstand some of the most brutal hurricane winds, and he'll do it at an affordable price. In fact, he is already doing it in Pensacola. Krantz started working with nonprofit organization Rebuild Northwest Florida in Pensacola after Hurricane Ivan tore through the city in 2004, leaving many with damaged or ruined homes. Safewall offered Rebuild Northwest Florida a package price to build frames for affordable homes out of concrete so that the homes can better resist hurricane winds in the future. "They think it's better than sliced bread," Krantz said. "We are starting eight more this week and doing at least three a week starting in January." Safewall created four different home models, each about 1,000 square feet. They include three bedrooms, one bathroom and a porch and will cost \$65,000 to \$70,000 once finished by Rebuild Northwest Florida. "I get to talk to homeowners and it brings tears to my eye. These people are so appreciative of what we are doing," Krantz said. "That's what had drawn me into affordable housing more than anything else."

Construction of Safewall's first affordable home in Jacksonville will begin in the next two weeks, on the Northside, Krantz said. All of the homes will have cast-in-place concrete walls, also called poured concrete walls, that can withstand winds up to 140 miles per hour and have heavy-duty roof sheeting for protection. Krantz said he is also considering installing impact glass into the homes -- glass that is stronger than normal windows. "Our goal is not only to provide affordable housing but to provide homes that can't be destroyed," he said. "They are one big storm shelter. Every house we build, it's going to be there for a long period of time."

Eventually, Krantz would like to build 1,000 homes a year, a mix of affordable and higher end. The affordable homes will be 1,000 to 1,200 square feet, all concrete, Energy Star-certified and priced between \$100,000 and \$125,000, he said. Both his affordable and higher-end homes will be built in the same fashion. "When you hear 'affordable' you think of cheap and low-class," Krantz said. "People cannot say we build cheap homes because our homes are designed and built the same way as the multimillion-dollar houses. "We are bringing these house into the next century and hope once we start doing this, a lot of people are going to start bringing their homes up to this standard," he said.

One multimillion-dollar house Safewall was contracted to build is a custom home by Benchmark Homes in Marsh Landing. The house, which will serve as a model for Benchmark and a home for Benchmark owners Rich and Nancy Morrison, has all poured concrete walls by Safewall. The Morrisons' home also will have impact glass and be prewired for an emergency generator that will be capable of lasting up to two weeks. Although the upgrades added 10 percent to 15 percent to the cost of the home, it was worth it, Rich Morrison said. "You definitely want to be prepared," he said. "I think it is money well spent."

Safewall has partnered with the [Yield Foundation](#) for the affordable-housing venture. The Yield Foundation, which stands for [Youth Institute for Education, Leadership and Development](#), focuses on helping kids with after-school studies, teaching them leadership skills and developing skills in different trades. Yield and Safewall paired up about eight months ago when Yield Foundation founder Rahman Ali and Krantz were introduced by a mutual friend. Yield's part of the partnership is to locate and secure land to build the homes on and to find potential buyers. Ali works with local financial institutions to identify people who could not normally afford a home and walk them through the mortgage process. That part is easy, Ali said. It's finding land that is tricky. To find available land, Ali and foundation employees scan newspaper ads and surplus city land that may become available.

He also attends the Jacksonville City Council's Task Force on Affordable and Low-Income Housing meetings to work with council members on getting land donated for affordable housing. He has not had luck with city donations yet. Councilman Kevin Hyde, who sits on the task force, said donation of city surplus land has been discussed during task force meetings, to mitigate costs associated with typical land prices. The high price of most land "can make a home not affordable," he said. "It's not so much the brick and mortar, it's the land on which it sits." The task force also has looked at other cities' affordable housing projects and how they were accomplished. Hyde said the task force hopes to have solid recommendations and possible legislation by Dec. 1. "It's time for us to come to some specific recommendations," he said. "Housing isn't getting any more affordable."

kedorsch@bizjournals.com | 265-2239

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