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Commercial Real Estate

Blue Sky CEO inspires change in communities across Florida through affordable housing



Shawn Wilson, president, Blue Sky Communities

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Shawn Wilson has spent decades working in the affordable housing space for both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. In 2012, he followed his entrepreneurial vision, and soon Blue Sky Communities was born.

Wilson told the Tampa Bay Business Journal about his career, passion for affordable housing and how his company is poised to help. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Can you describe what led to your decision to start that company and what successes you've had since then? During 20 years of working for other people, I always strove to grow and learn. Along the way, I saw a few others go out on their own with varying degrees of success. I knew I could do it, but I also knew I had to wait for the right opportunity. Upon emerging from the Great Recession, there were new opportunities.

Since our very first development, we have dedicated a portion of our units to permanent supportive housing, making their housing not just affordable but also supportive by offering residents extra services and programs provided by a partnered nonprofit agency. About a third of our properties are dedicated to people with disabilities or those struggling with homelessness. And about 10% of our units in all our properties are set aside for similar households.

A key to our success is the way we work with local governments, to listen to them first and then help them achieve their goals. We learn what problems they have and we present solutions. Then we work closely with them to bring it to life.

What kind of challenges have you had to overcome as a business owner? How has the Tampa Bay business community helped? Every site we pursue is dependent on securing limited public funding. So, the biggest challenge is to focus only on sites that we think the city or county will be supportive of. It's our job to learn what kind of affordable housing the cities and counties want, where they want it, and how they want it and then develop our proposal based on their needs.

The Tampa Bay business community has been a key part of our success. We have been able to create and sustain relationships with companies as diverse as the largest financial institutions in town (Raymond James Financial),

the oldest homeless service agency (Metropolitan Ministries), and a two-person planning/landscape architecture firm (Dark Moss led by local legend Ricky Peterika).

What have been some of the biggest changes you've seen in your industry?

One big change I've seen is the desire to build affordable housing in walkable areas with convenient proximity to public transportation. Not all of our residents have access to a vehicle or can drive, but they all still need to get groceries and run errands.

Do you think there should be a focus on affordable rentals or homeownership opportunities, or both?

Blue Sky only does rentals, but homeownership is important, too. I like it when local governments provide a soft second mortgage to lower-income buyers in mature neighborhoods. That not only benefits the family, but it stabilizes the block. When the second mortgage is forgivable after a period of time, as it should be, this provides a strong incentive to stay there for many years, and then the family gets the bump in equity to boot.

The demand for affordable housing continues to increase. How has the demand changed or shifted in recent years, and how have you worked to meet it?

The biggest change we've seen among those who we serve is the inability to chart a path toward homeownership and wealth. There are practically no "starter homes" on the market, and that goes for both new developments and single-family products. While we appreciate long-term tenancy, Blue Sky also wants to be a catalyst for our residents who wish to become homeowners.

What's it like being a trailblazer in the affordable housing space? I don't view myself as a trailblazer. When I came to town, I found a trail that had been blazed by the likes of Jack Wilson (no relation) and Debra Koehler. The trail was overgrown, perhaps, and rocky to be certain. I came on the scene, cleared some brush and opened the trail up to create some "blue sky." Blue Sky Communities now aims to shine a light on how to create apartment communities that foster long-term improvements in the lives of residents. I'm most excited to watch Blue Sky's residents excel in life.

Closer look

- **Education:** Bachelor's in Spanish from Ohio University, master's in economic and social development from the [University of Pittsburgh](#)
- **Hometown:** Dayton and Columbus, Ohio
- **Currently reading:** "Jewish Literacy" by Joseph Telushkin

- **Favorite movie:** "The Godfather"
- **Next vacation destination:** Oporto, Portugal

Day in the life of Shawn Wilson

● Sleep ● Personal time ● Work

