

When Preston Gitlin arrived in Costa Rica in 2006 with a dream to build “communities” as opposed to “developments” and declared that part of his plan was to give back to those communities, many people wondered if he would make good on those promises. The “New Kid on the Block” (he was 22, fresh out of Bentley University) had little real estate development experience and had only been in Costa Rica a few times for short periods. But even with a limited track record, people were still eager to invest in his vision because his enthusiasm for a new development model was, well, infectious. Within just a few months he had raised over \$400,000 to launch his dream. His idea of giving to the community struck a chord with people who wanted more than just a house in a gated development: they wanted to be part of something that would actually benefit Magallanes (just west of San Ramón), where “Pacific Hills”, his first development with 17 home sites, now sits, nearly sold out. Ah, but I’ve skipped over the interesting part -- the process that brought it all to fruition.



Not long after his arrival, Preston had a fortuitous meeting with Andrew Mastrandonas, owner of Angel Valley Farm Bed and Breakfast in Los Angeles Sur, just north of San Ramon. With a background in marketing for a major airline, and having done plenty of volunteer work in the Washington, D.C., area, Andrew brought to the mix qualities that would help

facilitate the execution of Preston’s vision. In short, Andrew became a mentor and friend to the visionary, together steering the helm of their newly-formed company, CR Communities. “There must be some genetic component at work here,” Andrew says with a wry smile. “After all, Preston comes from multiple generations of entrepreneurs! Once his vision started taking form, there was no stopping him. ‘No’ and ‘can’t’ are simply not in his vocabulary.”

To many they seemed a mismatched pair, but what evolved was a symbiotic relationship that flourished under some very strict ethical guidelines.

One of the first things they did was sign a set of “partnership principles,” which included honesty, openness, trust, and an aligned vision. They decided they would make no sale for the sake of the sale itself; that they would give people what they expected, and they would adhere to a cohesive standard of construction. But more important than the basic building code of all red roofs, exterior earth-tone colors for the houses, and Spanish or Mediterranean style architecture, their emphasis was on what they could do to improve the community that they had chosen. To date, they have donated two additional classrooms to the little school in Magallanes, donated a well for the public water system, a laptop for the primary school, school supplies, paid for the shipping of 12 computers for various schools in the San Ramón area, purchased soccer uniforms, paid for a lawyer to set up the non-profit program called “Adopting Escuelas,” and even paid to repair the local police vehicle. The value of these donations to date exceeds \$30,000 with plans to donate significantly more in the next few years, all of which has come

out of the profits of their corporation. “When I first said I wanted to be involved in community development, I was serious,” Preston said in a recent interview. “These donations improve the quality of life for more people than just those who build homes in our development.”

When it came to actually developing Pacific Hills they consciously decided to leave nothing to chance. They’ve laid down multiple layers of high-grade lastre on the roads, and each lot comes with electricity and water meter. At closing, the owners are presented with a corporation in which to hold title to their property. And behind the elegant wrought-iron gate created by local ironsmith Jimmy Rodriguez, more than 4,000 tropical plants were put in on either side of the road leading to the lots that are just waiting for someone’s dream home. A small yearly contribution assures that the roads will be maintained and there will be weekly trash pick-up. But getting back to their edict that they would make no sale simply for the sake of the sale and to insure the overall vision of their community, they pre-screen residents to assure that there will be a like-mindedness of people who truly want what they have to offer. In this process of getting to know prospective buyers, new relationships were formed and Andrew and Preston have become good friends with all their clients; they know their children, and sometimes even the grandchildren. “These are relationships for life,” Andrew said. “As we help people realize their dreams, we get the added satisfaction of knowing we made the community better than it was before.” Even with all the altruism, there is a sense of playfulness in both Andrew and Preston. They bat ideas back and forth faster than tennis balls in a Federer and Nadal tennis match. And as if one development wasn’t enough, they have launched a second project in another part of Magallanes called “Pacific Views” to which they will give the same attention to detail as their first project.



Also dear to both of them is one of their recently sold-out communities, “Organic Estates,” which will boast 12

luxury homes in the near future and will offer residents access to organically-grown fruits and vegetables. They will also make available to the public two similar projects later this year. CR Communities, in total by year’s end, will operate five developments, each one with the same attention to detail, high-quality infrastructure, and protection of the environment.

Both men have a few more gray hairs than they did three years ago, and even with 15-hour days, working on weekends, and very little time off, it’s clear that both men enjoy what they are doing. In the process of creating beautiful places to live, they have, in fact, made good on their promise to give back to the community. “But, most importantly,” Andrew says with a wide grin, “with as much work as this has been, if it weren’t fun we simply wouldn’t do it!”