

Baltimore native Deborah Robertson receives keys to HGTV's Urban Oasis in Chicago's Trump Tower

By William Hageman

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Getting a new home – whether it's a house, condo or an apartment — is usually pretty cut and dried. You go to an office, sign paperwork, and the place is yours. No big deal, no fanfare.

When Deborah Robertson got the keys to her new condo — a 35th-floor luxury unit in the Trump International Hotel & Tower in Chicago — it was a big deal. Three TV crews, reporters, photographers, family members and dozens of well-wishers were watching.

Robertson, of Baltimore, was the winner of HGTV's Urban Oasis contest. When her name was chosen from the 14 million entries last month, she became the owner of the unit. The condo comes in move-in condition, thanks to the efforts of HGTV design guru Vern Yip. The total package is valued at \$750,000.

At the key presentation Nov. 4 in the Trump Tower's 89th-floor penthouse — all 14,000 square feet of which can be yours for a mere \$30 million — a video was played showing Yip coming to Robertson's home and telling her she had won.

"I feel like I'm going to faint," she told him.

She was just as excited after seeing the unit for the first time.

"It's gorgeous, simply gorgeous," she said, looking out the large windows — *her* large windows — at Lake Michigan and beyond. "I love everything about it. That view is fantastic. I've never seen anything like it in my life."

The Urban Oasis Giveaway — this was the second, the first having been set in New York — is one of three similar annual contests from HGTV. The others are the HGTV Dream Home Giveaway, which will celebrate its 16th year in 2012, and the HGTV Green Home Giveaway, which started in 2008. The three giveaways have drawn an astounding 530 million entries.

"I want to tell people," Robertson said, "play the sweepstakes. If I can win, anybody can win."

And she was a dedicated player, entering twice a day, as allowed by the rules, every day for the entire two months the contest was open.

"That just shows that persistence pays off," Yip said.

Robertson, 57, lives with her sister, Nellie Johnson, in their childhood home in Baltimore. (Johnson; Robertson's daughter, Latonya Peters; and brother Thomas Bruce all made the trip to Chicago.)

Until last week, Robertson, who works as a staff assistant for the Social Security Administration, had never been to Chicago.

"It's gorgeous," she said of the city. "The buildings. Everything is gorgeous."

Two local TV news crews and another from HGTV were on hand for the ceremony, as well as several dozen representatives of companies that sponsored the Urban Oasis Giveaway and HGTV employees who helped with the project. ("The HGTV Urban Oasis Giveaway 2011" special is scheduled to air at 8 p.m. EST Dec. 29.)

Robertson was introduced to the group by Jon Steinlauf, executive vice president for sales and marketing for Scripps Network, who then turned things over to HGTV general manager Kathleen Finch.

"This building is so spectacular," Finch said. "What's even more spectacular is the apartment Deborah is going to be winning today. The reason it's so spectacular is Vern Yip is our designer."

Yip explained that even though he was designing a home for someone he'd never met — well before the contest was over, and without knowing the winner's likes and dislikes — the blank canvas he was given was a designer's dream.

"I can't buy a view like that," he said, gesturing toward floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. "The view is simply stunning. Plus all the amenities in the building (Robertson can enjoy the building's spa, fitness center, restaurant, concierge services and other goodies; the breadth of the luxury can be seen at trumpchicago.com)."

The unit came fully decorated and fully stocked. The kitchen included dishes, silverware, spices and even jars of fresh cookies. The bedroom featured a bed, plenty of drawer space and a loveseat. The living room, with a southeast view of landmark buildings, the Chicago River and Lake Michigan, had not only a sofa, coffee table and TV, but accents with a Chicago flavor.

Yip said he tried to pay tribute to the city through the decor. On one living room wall, for example, is a large, glazed terra cotta eagle that stood above the door of a long-gone Chicago building. Across the room is a cherry wood sconce inspired by the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright.

"The goal was to celebrate the city of Chicago, to capture what is unique about it," Yip said. "Everything is from the city of Chicago, or made by local artists, or comes from a store here in Chicago."

With all those items, and the building, and the view, the obvious question is, Is Robertson ready to become a Chicagoan, even on a part-time basis?

"I haven't thought about anything yet," she said. "I'm still talking with my daughter."

She also has a lawyer helping her out. There are tax implications, of course, and the unit has a \$560 monthly assessment.

For now, though, she's just enjoying her good fortune.

"Everybody is so nice," she said. "I love my favorite decorator. I love him to pieces. I love everybody."

"She's agreed I can come and sleep on her sofa," Yip said.

Responded Robertson: "You can come anytime."