

# habitat®

THE MAGAZINE OF HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

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# Help pave the path forward



President Carter suggests that the way we respond to a disaster should be a template for the way we respond to each other – and to the challenges facing our communities and our world.

These days, when you turn on the news or scroll through social media, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. So much crisis and loss, so much trauma and anger. The thing is, while our world is full of daunting issues, I know it is also full of people like you who have the values and strengths our world needs, people who can help pave the path forward.

In my new book, *Our Better Angels: Seven Simple Virtues That Will Change Your Life and the World*, I share the stories of a few of the people working to clear that path. Again and again, through my work with Habitat, I witness tales of fortitude and compassion – each one renewing my hope in the future that we all know is possible.

President Carter's essay in the wake of Hurricane Harvey inspired *Our Better Angels*. That storm covered the Houston area in water, but it also uncovered a resilient giving spirit that never fails to show up when our neighbors need it most.

"When the waters rise, so do our better angels. Pick a past disaster, and I'll tell you at least a dozen stories that stand as living testaments to our collective compassion, generosity – and unity," President Carter wrote.

He was right. We did see those better angels. As Harvey dissipated, and then hurricanes Irma and Maria, neighbors and strangers alike convened to begin the hard work of restoring and rebuilding communities. With your help and generosity, Habitat today carries on the work of recovery alongside families in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico.

President Carter went on to pose an intriguing question. What if, he asked, we

showed up for the people in our everyday lives, dealing with everyday struggles, the same way we show up after disasters? Think of what we could accomplish together with the same level of dedication and determination that we meet each catastrophe with. Can you imagine that world?

President Carter suggests that the way we respond to a disaster should be a template for the way we respond to each other – and to the challenges facing our communities and our world. "It really could be that simple," he says. "And that profound."

We so often see this approach at work in communities. One example you'll learn about in this issue: With impassioned residents at the helm and committed partners alongside them, local Habitats in 10 communities are participating in coalition efforts to tackle the crises that too many families face every day – neighborhoods that struggle with affordable and decent housing, food deserts, lack of transit options, few job opportunities. In this work, I see neighbors coming together with the fervor that these issues deserve.

Seeing what these communities have accomplished – and the determination with which they are doing it – emboldens and encourages me. Their efforts and the continued work of volunteers and supporters like you keep me optimistic.

Thank you for all that you do. Thank you for being one of our better angels.

**Jonathan T.M. Reckford**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Habitat for Humanity International

## HABITAT'S VISION

A world where everyone has a decent place to live

Driven by the vision that everyone needs a decent place to live, Habitat for Humanity began in 1976 as a grassroots effort on a community farm in southern Georgia. The Christian housing organization has since grown to become a leading global nonprofit working in local communities across all 50 states in the U.S. and in more than 70 countries.

Families and individuals in need of a hand up partner with Habitat to build or improve a place they can call home. Habitat homeowners help build their own homes alongside volunteers and pay an affordable mortgage.

Through financial support, volunteering or adding a voice to support affordable housing, everyone can help families achieve the strength, stability and self-reliance they need to build better lives for themselves.

Through shelter, we empower. To learn more, visit [habitat.org](http://habitat.org).

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**Habitat for Humanity**



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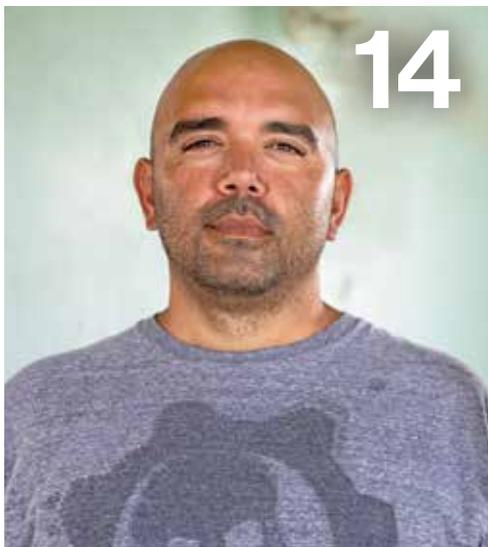
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## Building and growing

**F**or years, Gloria Kwan thought about taking a Habitat Global Village volunteer trip. Then she did it.

The Washington, D.C., resident and Habitat volunteer traveled to Chiang Mai, Thailand, to build alongside a family there. “The whole experience more than exceeded my expectations,” says Gloria, who works as an IT project manager. As she built concrete walls alongside the future homeowners and other volunteers, she also learned about a different culture – and herself.

“This experience really opened my eyes to how fortunate I am and how I can contribute to the bigger world,” Gloria says.



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

## Strong construction builds resilience

Omar and Wendy knew that their wooden house, not all that sturdy to begin with, was no match for Hurricane Maria.

Before the storm hit in September 2017, the couple secured the house with ropes in the hope that it would not blow away, then hunkered down in a shelter with their young daughters. When the winds died down, the family returned to their house to discover the walls had shifted and much of the roof was gone.

After partnering with Habitat Dominican Republic,

Omar and Wendy have a new home — one constructed specifically to better weather future storms. The house is built with strong and water-resistant wood. A new roof prevents leaking when the rains come. And a new electrical system has been installed, making the home safe.

“If it rains, we do not have to run and look for shelter because our own house is a safe place to stay,” Omar says. “Our daughters are very happy. We are happy to see them grow up safe, strong and independent.”



UGANDA

## Vocational skills and training create opportunity



To help support her family, Susan had to drop out of school to work for little pay, tending other families' gardens. The 19-year-old's life changed after she was selected to participate in a youth training program provided through a partnership between Habitat Uganda and the Pioneer Technical Institution in Iganga District.

The four-month training program is aimed at empowering young people by helping them to acquire



During October's 2019 Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project, more than 1,300 volunteers helped 21 families build their homes in Nashville, Tennessee. Over the past 36 years, President and Mrs. Carter have helped build or repair more than 4,000 homes in 14 countries alongside more than 100,000 volunteers. At the culmination of this year's event, Habitat Nashville joined the Carters in passing a trowel to the host of next year's build: Habitat Dominican Republic.



# building

hands-on vocational skills that can help improve the livelihood of their families. The students also receive start-up kits so they can start their own businesses.

Seventy-four young people, including Susan, graduated from the program this past May with skills ranging from bricklaying, welding and carpentry to motor vehicle mechanics, catering and hairdressing.

Susan pursued her passion of tailoring and garment cutting. Having completed her training, she is excited about having her own business. "Tailoring is in high demand in my home area," she says. "I have already secured a place where I will place my sewing machine and attend to my clients."

**"After building our house, my hope for life changed.**

"I can see my boys sleeping soundly. Their sound sleep not only makes them healthy and happy, but it allows them to have better dreams. **My heart cries with joy because I know my kids are dreaming about a better future.**

**"When you dream, it becomes a reality, and safe shelter creates the dream and hope.** I always think about how beautiful their dreams must be, and I want to make my kids' dreams a reality by providing them with the best education I can, so they can live a life they deserve."

**Bir Ram**, reflecting on the home he built with Habitat Nepal

BRAZIL



## Fighting for their children's future

Sloane spends her days working with and advocating for children with autism — including her two sons. “I fight for my children and their well-being,” she says. “They are able to have a normal life.”

A new Habitat house that can accommodate the boys' needs is a big step toward that life. This spring, Sloane and her husband, Josemar, built their home in Recife, on Brazil's northeast coast, alongside volunteers from Delta, which sponsored the house.

The couple is elated for the opportunities the house creates for their children — 14-year-old daughter, Slyane, 10-year-old Sérgio and 3-year-old Viktor. “I am so happy that my children will have their own special place,” says Sloane, who spent part of her own teen years homeless. “I can say, ‘This is mine. This is theirs.’”

Her boys' medical treatment had made it difficult for the family to afford a home on Josemar's salary from his job at a local hotel. The place they had been renting leaked during



INDIA

## A new tool for collecting water

In the small village of Nagewadi, in the western state of Maharashtra, residents do not have water in the homes. The women of the village collect the precious resource from wells, carrying back heavy pots on their heads. The physically challenging process can sometimes take well over an hour to complete, requiring time and energy away from other endeavors.

Today, Habitat India's water wheel initiative is shortening the time and easing the burden of this important task. College student Nanda says the water wheel, which holds 45 liters of liquid, or approximately 12 gallons, has been life-changing. “I enjoy rolling the water wheel and running behind it,” she says. “Before, I would not get much time for my studies. But now, because of the water wheel, I get time to study. The water wheel has made it convenient to carry water.”

opp



heavy rains. “It’s very difficult paying rent while trying to build a house. You can’t afford land. You can’t build anything,” Sloane says.

Now that she has helped build a home for her family, Sloane is turning her attention to her dream of opening a center that helps children with autism and their families. She has taken formal training and courses to better understand the developmental disorder and teaches workshops about it. For motivation, she looks to her own children.

JORDAN

## A healthy, decent place to live

Habitat Jordan has engaged more than 100 volunteers to help build new near-zero-carbon-emission homes by using techniques such as reflective paint and double-block brick walls for better insulation.

In existing homes, new shading devices, solar-thermal water heaters and rainwater collection tanks are making homes more energy- and water-efficient. Jordanian and Syrian refugee builders also have received training on related building techniques and strategies.

Because of high housing costs, almost 2 million Jordanians and Syrians have limited access to affordable and quality housing, and 1.3 million people live in poor conditions.

# portunity



**“If only my home could talk, I would have a million things to say to it.**

“Some things that I would like to say to my home: You are so special, and I appreciate all your impacts in my life. Just want to say you mean so much to me. Knowing you brought the light of joy into my life and gave me a reason to always be happy every day.

“You are so wonderful, the treasure of my life.”

Sixteen-year-old **Moses** has lived in the Habitat house his family built since 2017. This excerpt comes from his winning entry in Twin Cities Habitat’s storytelling contest “What does your home mean to you?”



80

Students applying lessons learned in Poudre High School's Geometry in Construction course as they help build an 1,100-square-foot Fort Collins Habitat home in Colorado. The Habitat home constructed during the 2019-2020 academic year will be the school's sixth. Eighty-four percent of former students surveyed reported that participating in the hands-on project increased their understanding of geometry.

\$100,000 to \$200,000

Estimated value of a previously unknown drawing by Austrian painter Egon Schiele discovered in a Habitat ReStore in Queens. Schiele made the pencil drawing in 1918, the same year he died at 28 of Spanish flu. The shopper who originally purchased the piece for less than \$80 didn't realize the drawing's value until nearly a year later after seeing the artist's other work. If it sells, the anonymous buyer plans to donate a portion of the proceeds to Habitat New York City.

54



Percent of Coloradans who have forgone health care as a result of the high cost of housing, according to a recent study by the Colorado Health Institute. Researchers found that while the average Colorado housing cost rose 77 percent over the last decade, the state's median income increased only 4.5 percent.



3 million

People around the world with increased access to secure land tenure thanks to Habitat's Solid Ground global advocacy campaign. Over the past three years, advocates have successfully worked with all levels of government in 41 countries to systematically reform land rights, upgrade slums, create disaster-resilient communities and promote gender equality in property rights.

120,000

Partial gallons of paint recycled by Lexington Habitat ReStores in Kentucky since 2008. The ReStores accept leftover paint in an effort to reduce waste while raising funds for their work in the community. The used paint is triple-filtered, mixed – with custom colors named by volunteers – then repackaged and sold at a discount.

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UNITED STATES

## Builders doing what they do best

Thousands of professional homebuilders and suppliers donate their time and treasure to build, renovate and repair homes during Habitat's annual Home Builders Blitz. For one week this past September, builders helped Habitat partner with more than 230 families in communities nationwide.

For Alicia Huey, Home Builders Blitz is all about the families. "They come out and work alongside us — their children, granddad, dad, brother, sister, sometimes their coworkers," says Huey, who owns a homebuilding company in Birmingham, Alabama, and has participated in 12 Home Builders Blitz events. "I don't get to know the families I build for every day like I get to know these families."

Regardless of whether Huey is building with Habitat or her own company, every home has something in common, she says. "This is where families are going to have Christmases and their kids' birthday parties in the backyard. We are building something where they can have memories."

During this year's Home Builders Blitz, Brian Calmes and his volunteer crew worked to remodel two homes, making them safer and more efficient. The work included installing new siding, wrapping windows and repairing soffits.

"This work is so important to the larger issue of affordable housing," says Calmes, president of his own construction company in Seymour, Wisconsin. "You can only build so many homes a year. Coming together to make small improvements to homes so they're livable, safe and affordable is something we all as neighbors can contribute to."



# The Carpenter's Gift

The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree has been milled into lumber and used in the construction of a Habitat for Humanity house every year since 2007. Once the trees come down after the holidays, the trunks become two-by-four and two-by-six beams that Tishman Speyer, owner and operator of Rockefeller Center, donates to Habitat.

Rockefeller Center Christmas trees have been used to help families build Habitat homes from New York to Mississippi. The 2013 Rockefeller tree is part of Dale's home in Connecticut. "We think about it all the time," he says. "When you help build from the bottom up, you remember where everything is."



The average Habitat home in the U.S. – a 1,200-square-foot house with three bedrooms – contains 400 two-by-fours.

Did you know? Two-by-fours are actually 1.5-by-3.5s. Although the lumber is initially cut to 2 inches by 4 inches, the subsequent drying and planing processes cause the pieces to lose approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch on each side.





The wood of a Norway Spruce, the species of many Rockefeller Christmas trees, is a flexible and durable type of lumber ideal for load-bearing walls and blocking – the filling, spacing, joining or reinforcing of frames, flooring, furniture and cabinetry.

ROCKEFELLER CENTER  
178  
TING



# Thank you

to our generous 2019  
**Home is the Key** partners!



home is the key<sup>sm</sup>

# Progress since the storms



Two years after the devastating 2017 hurricane season, Habitat for Humanity has made significant progress in helping families and communities in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean recover and build resilience to withstand future storms.

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria displaced tens of thousands of people, some of whom remain in temporary housing. Yet the recovery effort Habitat has undertaken in partnership with governments, civic and other nonprofit organizations, survivors, and supporters has been encouraging and has led to actions that may help avert the same level of loss in the future.

*Read updates on our work in the affected areas, and meet just a few of the families with whom we have partnered.*

## TEXAS

When Hurricane Harvey tore into Texas in September 2017, six local Habitat organizations responded as soon as floodwaters ebbed.

Initially, Habitat assessed the level of damage, helped residents find shelter, and offered to guide people applying for assistance from the federal government and insurance companies. In the time since, Habitat has built or repaired homes with families in affected communities in addition to providing disaster-related services and loans to homeowners.

Our impact also has extended beyond immediate disaster response. Houston Habitat, for example, has partnered with other nonprofits not only to help individual homeowners recover, but also to work to preserve affordable housing stock — already

a struggle in the city and surrounding areas before the storm made the situation much worse. We also are educating communities through our Habitat Ready program and building homes through our Habitat Strong program that are more durable and resilient to reduce the need for post-disaster rebuilding in the future.

In Rosenberg, a suburb of Houston, Lauren and her family are settling into their new Habitat home.

The apartment where they had been living during Harvey was covered with mold after the hurricane. The situation wasn't healthy for Lauren's 9-year-old daughter, who has asthma. "I feel like life in this house is going to be very good," says Lauren, who partnered with Fort Bend Habitat to build her home.

The work continues. Other local agencies involved in repair work have indicated that they already have or will cease disaster repair efforts. Habitat, however, is committed to partnering with residents still struggling to recover.

"There is no organization that does work on the back end like we do," says Sherwin Sun, Fort Bend Habitat's executive director. "There is nobody who responds to a disaster in the long run the way that Habitat does." ○



**“There is nobody who responds to a disaster in the long run the way that Habitat does.”**

**Sherwin Sun**, Fort Bend Habitat's executive director



## FLORIDA

Affordability was an ongoing struggle in the Florida communities devastated by Hurricane Irma before the storm wiped out much of the housing stock in 2017.

Two years later, residents still are rebuilding, many living with relatives or crowding into what rental space they can find while they await repairs or completion and purchase of a Habitat home.

In the time since the storm, we have been hard at work helping families build or repair safe, affordable homes across the state in areas hit by Irma and providing disaster-related services to affected families as well. In addition to the ongoing recovery work, Habitat is investing in disaster preparedness at the community level to build resilience for the future. We are building back stronger through the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety's FORTIFIED Home program for resiliency, partnering with local



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80	6.8%
85	7.8%
90+	9.0%

\* The annuity and tax deduction are slightly lower when two annuitants are designated.

agencies, and offering homeownership education, which includes information about the importance of insurance, how to identify licensed and insured contractors, and general home maintenance.

The goal of all of this is resilience for families like Samantha’s. The 5-year-old smiles as she shows off her new bedroom with her parents, Didier and Anny, and announces, “This house just makes my heart glow!”

If Samantha’s heart is glowing, her parents’ are bursting with gratitude. “I know that we are not going to be homeless again,” Didier says.

Didier and Anny lost everything when Hurricane Irma hit Marathon, Florida. Their rental was destroyed, along with furniture, clothes, toys and memories. The search for a decent and affordable place became even more critical because they were expecting their younger child, Dylan.

“Marathon is a community made up of 8,500 people, and most of those we consider the infrastructure — our day care workers, our teachers, our firemen, our policemen,” says Christine Todd Young, executive director of Habitat Middle Keys. “When I see a family who’s lost everything be able to get back home or into a new home that’s strong, safe and secure, the feeling is indescribable.”

Didier, a construction worker and longtime volunteer with Habitat Middle Keys, says, “A couple of years back, I was volunteering on the home of a friend of mine and I said, ‘I hope I can have a house like you someday.’” The two are now neighbors.

“Samantha and Dylan are in love with the new house,” Didier says. “And that makes me happy and makes me want to work even harder.” Anny, a preschool teacher, adds, “I’m feeling protected. I’m feeling complete.” ☺

## “This house just makes my heart glow!”

**Samantha**, on her new Habitat home



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## PUERTO RICO

When back-to-back hurricanes Irma and Maria hit Puerto Rico, the powerful storms wiped out infrastructure, livelihoods and homes. Two years later, through a multi-year, multi-faceted approach involving private, public and nonprofit partners, Habitat is making progress in communities throughout Puerto Rico and advocating for changes that will build resilience and reduce delays in recovery when disaster strikes again.

It took nearly a year to return power to the whole island, and it will take many more to replace the lost shelter, as two major issues from the island's near and distant past have played a large role in recovery efforts: land tenure and a shortage of construction workers.

With these challenges in mind, Habitat has organized its disaster recovery work to focus on:

- Repairs, rehabilitation of existing structures and new construction.
- Capacity building for families, for the construction sector and for increased community resiliency.
- Security of tenure/property ownership.
- Knowledge sharing.

Habitat began repair work as soon as possible in Caguas and Bayamón and expanded to four other municipalities: Yabucoa, San Juan, Carolina and Loiza. In addition to these six communities, repair work will expand into Guayama, Santa Isabel, Patillas, Salinas and



## THE CARIBBEAN

In the Dominican Republic, we are adapting the Habitat manual on wooden resilient houses and will produce a series of videos showing the implementation of low-cost retrofitting techniques in houses to help train construction workers.

In the Commonwealth of Dominica, Habitat is starting a new project aimed at providing alternative livelihoods to affected populations by bridging the gap between labor supply and demand in the construction sector through a series of training sessions. We are partnering with the International Organization for Migration on house repairs and will cover the labor costs for 10 houses, averaging US\$4,000 to \$5,000 each.

Arroyo. At the same time, the rehabilitation of existing housing units is slated to begin and finish in San Juan and Guayama, and construction of new homes is slated to begin in Guayama.

For Juan Antonio, partnering with Habitat has meant finally replacing the blue tarps that have covered his home for the last two years.

His new hurricane-hardened roof includes extra reinforcements to make him and his home



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more resilient against future disasters. He wasn't sure that his home of 23 years would ever be habitable again — let alone rebuilt better and stronger than before. "It's like when you're in the dark, and you start to see a little bit of light," Juan Antonio says of Habitat's help. "Over time, that light gets bigger — with hope and with happiness."

In addition to directly partnering with families like Juan Antonio's to improve their shelter, Habitat also is focusing on building up the skills of construction workers on the island and investing in the recruitment and training of new laborers, with a special focus on getting women into the construction trades. Through our efforts, local construction workers have completed both construction safety and comprehensive training from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Additional trainings, including timber frame roof repairs, are next up.

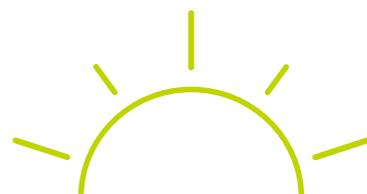
Habitat also is working to address land titling issues. More than half of Puerto Rican families don't have documents proving that they own their land, which can delay rebuilding. We are working at the household level to help families legalize their title status and at the community level with local organizations dedicated to solving Puerto Rico's tenure issues. We also are a part of a policy working group founded with partners Center for New Economy, University of Puerto Rico Law School and ReImagina PR. Leveraging Habitat's national platform, the group will take recommendations from grassroots coalitions to the government of Puerto Rico and national stakeholders.

We have also acted as a bridge and amplifying voice for organizations, institutions, municipalities, the government of Puerto Rico and disaster survivors working together to speed up and improve the quality of Puerto Rico's recovery.

"I looked for help in so many different places," Juan Antonio says. "Thanks to Habitat, I can come home again." ◉

## "You start to see a little bit of light."

Juan Antonio, Habitat homeowner





# Celebrating our better angels

In his new book — *Our Better Angels: Seven Simple Virtues That Will Change Your Life and the World* — Habitat for Humanity CEO Jonathan Reckford shines the spotlight on seven timeless virtues and shares stories that show how we all can work to improve the quality of our own lives as well as the lives of those around us.

These stories, like so many that we share with you, illustrate how virtues become values, how cooperation becomes connection, and how even the smallest act of compassion can encourage actions that transform the world.

Contemplate these virtues with us as we consider their importance during this season of reflection and celebration.

**“When the water rises, so do our better angels. How much could we accomplish together if we were able to see the world every day the way we see the world after a disaster? Neighbors in need. People with resources. All of us in this together.”**

**President Jimmy Carter**, from his foreword to *Our Better Angels*



kindness

**Being part of a community offers a sense of belonging and comfort in knowing you have a team to support and shepherd you through good times and bad. And contributing to your community provides a sense of meaning, of purpose and of pride. Every friendly wave, tool borrowed or block party organized helps solidify those connections. At the end of the day, what drives us are the people from all walks of life who partner with us to build and improve places to call home, building community as they do so.**



comm

Practicing kindness may be the easiest way to change your entire outlook on life — or somebody else's. Even the smallest acts can show that you are acknowledging another person, that you care about them. And when we're treated kindly, we're more likely to bestow that kindness onto others, passing it on in a series of gentle waves whose ultimate effects we may never know.



When we help the people around us dream bigger and reach higher, we're not only sharing our blessings and helping one other person. We are doing our small part to help make the world full of people who are stable, fulfilled and confident – people who can use that vantage point to then turn around and offer their own hand up. At Habitat, we know the power of empowerment. Whether you're living in it, building it or advocating for it, improved and affordable shelter helps empower each of us involved to be all that we can be.



# empowerment



# respe



Joy is more than an emotion — it's a deep, underlying attitude of the spirit. Joy is a choice. You have to practice it, act it out, and before you know it, you're experiencing the real thing. Choosing to be positive doesn't mean ignoring the injustices in the world, but it does mean being mindful of all the good that exists here, too. Only by recognizing the good — a warm smile, a helping hand, a safe space — and finding joy can we capitalize on and share those blessings with others.



**Respect for others is at the heart of everything Habitat does. In our more than four decades, we've seen how embracing someone else's life experiences leads to new friendships, new perspectives and a new sense of belonging. By pulling down the invisible walls that can separate us and focusing instead on the intrinsic values that bind us, we develop the kind of understanding and connection that leads to a future that is so much bigger, so much brighter, than any one of us could even dare to dream of — much less reach — alone.**

Screenwriter Randall Wallace, a devoted Habitat organizer and volunteer, captured the spirit of what we do — and why we do it — when he said, “Habitat for Humanity is a perpetual motion miracle; everyone who receives, gives and everyone who gives, receives. If you want to live complacent and uninspired, stay away from Habitat. Come close to Habitat, and it will change you and make you part of something that changes the world.”

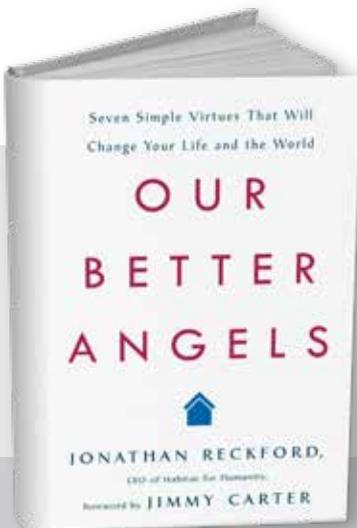
# generosity





# service

Everyone deserves a decent place to live – and everyone has the ability to do something to help make that a reality. Each of us has the ability to serve and the power to shape a better world exactly where we are. Best of all, service is the place where other virtues come to life. Working alongside each other, we build a sense of community, kindness, empowerment, generosity, respect and joy. In this way, serving together, we all are able to reach our better angels and our best selves.



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# Harnessing collective power



**How residents, Habitat and partners are working together to create meaningful change in communities**



**In 10 communities across the United States**, Habitat for Humanity is working with national and local partners to help residents harness their collective power and develop the tools they need to bring meaningful and lasting change to their neighborhoods.

Using Habitat's Quality of Life Framework – an innovative approach which begins with understanding residents' dreams and concerns for their neighborhoods – coalitions of residents, businesses, churches, schools and other stakeholders are coming up with solutions as distinctive as the neighborhoods themselves. Goals across the 10 neighborhoods vary from building more affordable housing to developing public parks, from organizing safety meetings with local police to attracting new business, from instituting property tax limits to helping older residents age in place.

The revitalization initiative – made possible through the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Lowe's, Wells Fargo Foundation and General Motors, as well as local partners – will take place over five years. One year in, experience the transformation taking place and meet a pair of residents who have made the cause their own.



## Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“See the ants?” Tommy Joshua Caison stops weeding to gesture to a colony scurrying in every direction. “I don’t want to disturb them. They belong here, too.”

Caison, founder and executive director of North Philly Peace Park, has become adept at finding teachable moments in the everyday for the small parade of kids that often trails him as he tackles projects around the park. Their eagerness is what inspires Caison to keep dreaming bigger year after year – for both the park and the people it serves.

For many, the space has become something of a second home – an escape from the city blocks that lie beyond the gateless fences. Monthly Self-Care Saturday events offer fresh produce,

the opportunity to meet with a nutritionist, speak with a therapist or take a yoga class. Recently, the park became home to Green Wall Street, a green workforce development program and makerspace.

While the North Philly Peace Park has developed programs to help every age group, there is a particular focus on young people. The park, for example, has served as a classroom for a STEAM educational program for 160 neighborhood kids. Caison knows young people have the potential to lead this neighborhood of Sharswood in a positive direction – because he’s seen it here in the park. “The sweetness, the intelligence, the curiosity, the wanting to help, to make an impact – that’s real.”

For many neighborhood residents, making ends meet is a daily struggle. The neighborhood is both a food and pharmacy desert, leading to and exacerbating high rates of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Housing that is both up to code and affordable is extremely sparse, forcing many families to choose between having money for other needs or protecting their children’s health. Crime has proliferated. Employment opportunities have suffered.

However, Caison, a third-generation Sharswood resident, says it’s time for these cycles to be broken – and that starts by changing the neighborhood itself. “It comes down to the stimulus that you are exposed to between that young age and being an adult,” he says, nodding





toward a 10-year old jumping from log seat to log seat in a circle around Caison. “North Philly Peace Park hopes to be a disruptor of any type of cycle that would lead to that young man ending up in prison or having a heart attack at a young age because of his cholesterol levels. We have been working with partners to address this reality of the need for a new environment.”

Habitat Philadelphia is one of those supporting partners. Recognizing that the needs of Sharswood extend far beyond housing, the team is looking at a holistic strategy for revitalization – one driven by the residents themselves.

The impact of this collaborative approach can already be felt. To show their dedication to the well-being of the neighborhood,



Philadelphia Housing Authority relocated their headquarters there. Construction of Habitat homes has begun to increase opportunities for affordable homeownership, while critical home repairs help existing homeowners improve their homes. A shuttered high school has reopened. Beautification efforts, including neighborhood cleanups, are underway. There are plans for a grocery store to open soon.

Caison is excited for the future. It’s hard not to be. Talking once again to the boys who follow him through the park, he returns to the ant colony. “As I was pulling up the weeds, I disrupted their colonies. All because I had my vision of what I wanted the path to look like. Even the littlest person can be affected by activities that other people do,” he says. “We have to be mindful about that. We have to consider and care for everyone.”

## Lafayette, Louisiana

McComb-Veazey, a historic neighborhood adjacent to downtown Lafayette, has a new Community House.

At the direction of the McComb-Veazey Neighborhood Coterie, a coalition of residents and community stakeholders, Lafayette Habitat and partners created the Community House by rehabbing a once boarded-up home. “It is already a catalyst for change,” says Tina Shelvin Bingham, chair of the coterie and Lafayette Habitat’s community development director. The house has a big wraparound porch and yard that offers older residents a place to socialize and neighborhood children a place to play. It also is a place for regular meetings and family-friendly gatherings as well as programs aimed at sparking resident entrepreneurship and financial independence. “Our goal is to show people how to build their wealth and give them access to different opportunities,” says Shelvin Bingham.

In coming months, the coterie will work to develop property it recently acquired adjacent to the Community House. Plans include transforming the site, now an abandoned gas station, into a public market with healthy food options.





Tommy Joshua  
Caison



## Muncie, Indiana

Debra Simmons had her doubts. All the talk about turning around her neighborhood was likely just that. “You hear a lot of promises from people over the years,” Simmons says. “You don’t see anything happening.”

Still, Simmons decided to show up at a local church for a meeting of the 8twelve Coalition, made up of residents and some two dozen community groups and businesses bent on revitalizing a once thriving area hit hard by plant closures, the opioid crisis and overwhelming skepticism. She timidly put up her hand to volunteer on the beautification committee because, she says, “I like flowers, and I like to make things look nice.”

As the 8twelve Coalition has taken root, Simmons has put her hand up more and more. Today, she is one of the leaders of the coalition and a force behind much of the change taking place. Results so far include new and rehabbed homes as well as the demolition of dilapidated ones. Community gardens sprout vegetables and resident artwork. With 1 in 3 homes in the 8twelve’s target area vacant, residents and coalition members have painted pieces of plywood to resemble window panes and boarded up abandoned homes to make them look occupied and to deter trespassers.

The coalition is developing a plan for a largely vacant corridor that could include a health clinic and public market to replace the grocery store that closed there two years ago.

For 60-year-old Simmons, getting resident buy-in is about creating lasting change for the neighborhood. She bought her house in 2001, and “I fell in love with it and the neighborhood,” she says. Her tree-lined street was filled with families who all knew and looked out for one another.

Unfortunately, hard times were just around the corner. Muncie’s auto industry was drying up as manufacturing was moving overseas. A fenced-off, 60-acre brownfield that sits in

## Dacono, Colorado

Residents in The Glens have a simple and straightforward vision for their rural northern Colorado neighborhood: “A quiet, friendly neighborhood where our dreams can come true.” The nearly 800 households that make up this once coal-mining town are wasting no time in bringing that vision to life.

The first step: ensuring everyone is engaged and understands the value they bring to the neighborhood, to their home. Efforts to promote cohesion include collecting input to identify common values and goals, training residents to become leaders, distributing quarterly newsletters – in both Spanish and English – and installing several bulletin boards to celebrate victories and announce future projects. A sense of community also has been strengthened through regular resident meetings and seasonal block parties, coalition-sponsored movies in the park, and contributions to the city’s annual festival.

The effort is paying off in a big way, says Krystal Winship Erazo, St. Vrain Habitat neighborhood revitalization manager. Through community-wide beautification efforts, critical home repairs and the construction of affordable new Habitat homes alongside first-time homebuyers, residents are rolling up their sleeves and leaning into their joint strength to ensure that The Glens remains affordable and accessible to all who wish to be a part of its shared future.

“I’ve seen a really transformative spirit come alive,” Winship Erazo says. “Folks are extremely energized and inspired and empowered. And they are beginning to see how powerful they actually are.”

the 8twelve target area is what's left of a factory that closed in 2006. Then came the Great Recession. Many of the houses that generations of factory workers had called home fell into disrepair or were abandoned.

The memory of what used to be is what drove Simmons to put up her hand. She flies a "Love Grows Here" flag on her tan-colored house. "My aspiration is to make this a place where people love to live," she says. "Then you get the kids. Then they want to continue to live here and keep the improvement going."

Simmons sits on multiple committees of the 8twelve Coalition and attends conferences to learn more about how to revitalize a neighborhood. She mows the pocket park across the street from her house that was purchased and developed by the coalition. She helps to organize neighborhood cleanups.



**Debra Simmons**

Residents are taking more pride in the community, she says. How does she know? It used to be a dumping ground for old tires. "We got almost 300 tires the first year. The next year we got about 60. This year, we are down to 30," she says. "It makes an impact if you keep an area clean and picked up. People have a little more respect knowing that people are out working, trying to make the neighborhood a better place."

## Long Beach, California

A colorful mural of diverse people coming together through a heart-shaped opening in a wall now graces Washington Middle School, the heart of a revitalizing Long Beach neighborhood. In the artwork, the Statue of Liberty wields the sledgehammer that has created the opening in the wall.

The 30,000-square-foot mural titled "Love Beyond Borders" is the culmination of months of collaboration among neighborhood residents, government entities and community partners. The mural "not only adds beautiful art to the community but also communicates such a powerful message," says Erin Rank, president and CEO of Habitat Greater Los Angeles, part of the coalition working together to revitalize the neighborhood.

Residents selected the local artist to illustrate the message that everyone is welcome in their community. Everyone was invited to help paint the mural on the outside of the middle school, and students, teachers, parents, residents, Habitat staff and community partners all picked up a paintbrush.





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