

Habitat for Humanity's New Blueprints



Photo courtesy of Habitat for Humanity International

WHEN HABITAT FOR Humanity International (HFHI) was founded in 1976 by Millard and Linda Fuller, its mission was clear: to eliminate substandard housing. Nearly 30 years and 176,000 Habitat-built homes later, the mission remains strong—and it is being realized by the nonprofit housing organization in new and innovative ways.

Recently attaining its goal of working in 100 countries across the globe, and looking forward to erecting its 200,000th home and housing its one-millionth person by the end of 2005, HFHI is designing programs to attract non-traditional volunteers. Through inventive efforts including Raise the Roof and Women Build, the organization is handing out helmets and hammers to rock stars and women.

"We want to reach everyone, and these programs are a great way to inform people who may not know about HFHI," says spokesperson Heather Wellman. "I think that with any organization, it's important to develop new strategies to raise awareness and funds."

Raise the Roof was conceived after Cher's tour crew members secretly teamed with HFHI and Clear Channel Entertainment to build a Habitat house in the singer's name during their tour stop in Minneapolis. The initiative was so highly regarded by Cher and all the participants that it evolved into a national program in which well-known artists lend their name and support to a house-building in a community where they are performing. Cher serves as Raise the Roof's honorary chair and Clear Channel contributes a significant portion of building expenses. The program, which kicked off in mid-2004, has had such artists as Blink 182, John Mayer, Linkin Park and The Dave Matthews Band working side by side with volunteers and homeowners-to-be just hours before the musicians take the stage at a local venue.

"It's been a wonderful partnership," says HFHI special-events director Karen Lienau of this unique union of charity and entertainment. "Through this program, we hope to attract high school and college crowds, the typical concertgoers, and get them excited about what we do."

Women Build draws women from all walks of life and then trains them to build decent, affordable houses. Informally started in North Carolina in 1991 (it became official in 1998), Women Build is responsible for more than 350 Habitat homes in the United States.

Among the newer Women Build affiliates is the one formed in Newark, New Jersey. With participants ranging in age from 20 to 75 and representing an array of ethnic groups and career paths, Newark Women Build has not only provided the home's recipient with hope for the future, it has promoted a unique camaraderie among the women builders as well. As co-chair Lynn Blaesser notes, "The program is about women working together for society and other women. Our experience has shown us what we are capable of doing. It's taught us important skills and has been a real strength-builder."

HFHI has more creative programs in the pipeline, says Wellman. In the meantime, it will carry on with its successful formula for sheltering people worldwide. Homeowners-to-be still purchase their houses with no-interest loans, a down payment and sweat equity—250 to 400 hours of labor per each adult in the household.

"Many people think we're a handout, when we're really a hand up," Wellman says. "This type of investment is more than about constructing houses, it's about building communities and foundations for better lives. Volunteers also benefit by learning construction and committee skills.

"We've worked hard to maintain our grassroots structure," she adds, "and believe that things are best accomplished on a local level."

Headquartered in Georgia, Habitat for Humanity International supports more than 2,500 affiliates around the world. Each affiliate has its own board and independently coordinates fund-raising and building services in its area. Volunteer opportunities exist in administration, fund-raising and building. For more information, visit HFHI on line at www.habitat.org. ■

—Julie Jacobs