

Blueprint

SPRING 2021



THE NEWSLETTER OF
Habitat
for Humanity®
of Greater Charlottesville



Future Neighbors Marquita Thomas (left) and Keisha Washington (right)



BUILDING

Ramping Up

Habitat Pushes Forward Despite the Covid Pandemic

For Marquita Thomas and her four boys, purchasing their new Habitat home on Huntley Avenue this summer will be both the culmination of years of hard work and a welcome place to rest.

"It's a light at the end of the tunnel," says Marquita. "It just makes us so happy."

Marquita will be one of a record 25 new local Habitat homebuyers this year.

In order to aggressively address a significant shortage of affordable housing in our region and provide equity building opportunities to families that have been shut out of the market for generations, Habitat is more than doubling its already-national-pace-setting homebuilding operations.

"Over the past decade we've built and sold an average of 18 homes a year, setting the national standard for a Habitat organization

in an area of our size," says Habitat President and CEO Dan Rosensweig. "But this is no time to rest on our laurels. Until everyone can find safe, decent, affordable housing, until opportunities to enjoy the blessings of homeownership are available to all, we won't stop pushing, we won't stop working."

Rosensweig says that the organization and its thousands of volunteers are energized by having the chance to work side by side with inspirational partners like Marquita, a frontline healthcare worker at the University of Virginia hospital by night and a full-time mom and at-home educator by day.

For the past year, Marquita has juggled her role as nurse assistant, mother and teacher all while completing Habitat's homeownership curriculum, financial education, housing counseling, and 200 hours of sweat equity. And, she's accomplished all of this in the midst of a pandemic that put her at risk every day and forced her to sacrifice sleep to both care for her community and provide for her family.



This past year has been really, really stressful... But I just kept with it. I never gave up.



"I work nights so I can do virtual learning with them," Marquita says. "This past year has been really, really stressful. When you think about all the steps you have to take you feel like you can't do it, and that's how I felt sometimes. But I just kept up with it. I never gave up."

The Thomas home in the JPA section of Charlottesville is scheduled for completion this month. For Marquita and her boys, that can't come quick enough.

"We drive by about once a week just to look at [the house] and see the progress," she says. "We sit in the car and dream of what it will be like to live there."



FROM THE President & CEO

**But they shall sit under their own
vine and under their own fig
trees, and no one should make
them afraid. - MICAH 4:4**

I've been thinking about this passage from Hebrew Scriptures a lot lately. Referring to the newly found independence of peasant farmers recently freed from the tyranny of military rule, the quote celebrates so many of the blessings we enjoy—or are longing to enjoy—at this particular moment in our history.

Every day, we get closer to moving past the brutal isolation of the pandemic. With each newly vaccinated neighbor, we take another step toward herd immunity and the ability to once again be together, to share a meal, to swing a hammer side-by-side with partner families.

Similarly, after the historic political events of the past few years, we also now have an opportunity to rise above the heightened

emotions of the daily news cycle so that we may take stock, allow ourselves a moment of reflection and plan for what comes next.

And, although the times are as turbulent as any of us can recall, it bears remembering that we have been here before.

Perhaps to remind us of this, the character of George Washington in the musical Hamilton expresses his admiration for Micah 4.4 (which the real president quoted in his writing at least 50 times). The play connects this passage with Washington's most notable and enduring act—choosing voluntarily to step away from the office to remind the nascent country that presidents are not kings and that the peaceful transition of power is fundamental to democracy. As we find it in our hearts to bestow grace upon our fellow citizens with whom we may disagree, this is a lesson we would be wise to heed today.

Writer and composer Lin-Manuel Miranda's portrayal of Washington reminds us that, despite the founding fathers' flaws, they recognized the need to eventually let go of the impulse to degenerate into permanent, factional strife. The urge to sit under one's own vine and fig tree signifies a desire for reconciliation and need to rediscover our common purpose.

It also describes a longing for a safe place to call home.

In explaining his motive for stepping down to an initially incredulous Alexander Hamilton, Miranda's character describes his burning desire, after 45 years of public service, to return to his "own vine and fig tree" at Mount Vernon, "safe in this nation we've made."

It is a version of this longing that animates Habitat partners like Marquita Thomas. For Marquita, the past year of juggling the multiple demands of work, motherhood and Habitat sweat equity during a global

pandemic and intense political upheaval has been "really, really stressful." But now she sees the "light at the end of the tunnel." As she drives daily past her new house being built in the Jefferson Park Neighborhood, she imagines soon sitting with her children under their own vine, finally taking repose in a home she herself has made.

In addition to expressing a longing for one's home, however, Micah 4.4 also serves as a call to action. As a variety of fruit with an outsized influence on the health of other species in its ecosystem, the fig reminds us how much we belong to one another, how much more we can accomplish when we embrace each other and rely on our neighbors for creation, building and renewal.

One of the things that has always moved me most about the work we are doing at Southwood is just how eager folks in the community are to work together and to welcome new people. One of the first commitments of resident planners like Mercedes (featured on page 5) was to design a redeveloped community that embraces new neighbors, that provides homes for people from all walks of life and that features wonderful community gathering spaces so that folks from different backgrounds can come together.

This year, we at Habitat are pushing ourselves to do more than ever before because, for every Marquita and Mercedes, there are hundreds more neighbors in need of a safe home and a healthier community. With your help, we have begun construction at Southwood and are preparing families for a record number of homes built and sold throughout Central Virginia. Each one of those homes will provide blessed refuge, a "vine and fig tree" for fellow neighbors who have been longing for—and in many cases denied—a simple, decent, affordable place of their own.

WHY WE'RE BUILDING MORE



379

Family inquiries about Habitat homeownership in 2020



166

Applications received for Habitat homeownership



36

Families accepted into Habitat's Homebuyer Program

Expanding Habitat's Regional Housing Initiatives to Serve More Families



Erin Swinson and her son Zander were staying with her grandparents in Louisa County, living day to day and wondering what comes next.

"They happily took us in, but they told me I needed to have a plan," said Erin of her grandparents. "Me living with them was only ever going to be a temporary situation."

It wasn't ideal, but after paying the babysitter and the bills, and putting food on the table, "there was never enough left to get a place of our own, much less a house."

Her determination to do better, to provide a stable home for her son inspired her to take a coworker's advice and attend a Habitat interest meeting at the Louisa County Library.

"I really didn't think I would have a chance at this program," she recalled. "But they sent me a letter telling me I was approved!"

After that it was a whirlwind.

In February, after months of juggling her work, childcare, financial coaching and more than 200 hours of sweat equity, Erin and Zander closed on their home on Blueberry Lane.

"It was literally down to how much I spend on shampoo," she says, reflecting on the

financial education she received through Habitat volunteers in Louisa. "It was very intense, but I understand the purpose."

Erin's plight prior to partnering with Habitat is not unique.

A recent study by the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission identified a 14,000 unit affordable housing gap in the region, inclusive of the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle, Louisa, Greene, Fluvanna and Nelson Counties.

At Habitat, we are addressing this gap head on.

This year, we formally committed ourselves to a comprehensive regional approach to address housing challenges in both the urban and rural areas of Central Virginia. As a result, over the next few years, we will build more new homes, rehabilitate more existing ones and help more families remain in their homes in Louisa and Greene Counties.

Whereas we have historically built and rehabbed a few homes in the rural counties each year, working with a core group of long-time volunteers in Louisa and Greene, we have committed to building 30 homes, executing 80 home repairs, and impacting more than 200 families through advocacy



I think getting the word out there is really important to help people realize that Habitat for Humanity is doing something unarguably good.



work over the next five years. This reflects an increase in impact of more than 200%. And it means that more families like the Swinsons will have access to safe, decent, and affordable housing in the years to come.

"I've been able to talk with other people who have been in a difficult situation and think [partnering with Habitat] might be the right decision," says Erin about her intention to pay it forward, to help others in her community who could benefit from the regional housing increase in productivity.

"I think my place in all of this is to continue to raise awareness. I didn't even know Habitat existed in Louisa until that day when my coworker was talking to me about it. I think getting the word out there is really important to help people realize that Habitat for Humanity is doing something unarguably good."



Construction Begins at Southwood

The clangs and roars of heavy machinery common on Old Lynchburg Road these days represent clear sounds of hope.

After 12 years of hard work planning their new community, the residents of the Southwood Mobile Home Park wake up every day one step closer to their new homes.

“We have dreamed of the day we would actually start to see trees come down. And fast forward to today, we have finally begun to see the years of hard work pay off,” says Selena Espindola.

Now a Habitat staff member, Selena grew up in Southwood and remembers Habitat purchasing the mobile park when she was young. “I would often hear my parents, family and friends talk about the new homes Habitat would help build. It’s the

same dream and excitement many other families who live in Southwood share.”

With the first homes on track to be started this summer, site contractors and Habitat’s construction team are hard at work.

Behind the scenes, the first homebuyers and resident planners are busy as well. Future homeowners are working one on one with Habitat financial coaches to prepare to purchase their homes and the resident planning team is putting the final touches on a site plan for the second village.

Meanwhile, Southwood residents who worked to design the first phase of the new community have transitioned onto the neighborhood Architectural Review Board (ARB). The ARB oversees approval of all designs for homes and common areas in the new neighborhood.

ARB member and community planner Mercedes Gomez says she is “very thankful to participate in the community.”

“I am responsible for making decisions and have to take into consideration the [other]

“True sustainability has to involve more than just ecological considerations. You have to ensure that the democratic values... last well beyond the physical transformation stage.”



community members in order to support Southwood,” said Mercedes. “It is beautiful to be able to represent the community.”

Per Habitat’s Southwood code of development, the ARB will always comprise at least 51% Southwood residents ensuring that the commitment to an inclusive, resident-led process lasts in perpetuity.

“True sustainability has to involve more than just ecological considerations,” said Habitat President and CEO Dan Rosensweig. “You have to ensure that the democratic values which laid the foundation for the new community last well beyond the physical transformation stage. The ARB is but one of many examples of the ways that the novelty of resident-led planning will morph simply into a way of life.”





967 2nd Street SE
Charlottesville, VA 22902
T (434) 293-9066 | F (434) 293-0683
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WHAT WILL YOU BUILD?



VOLUNTEER

Lend your skills to Habitat. From photography, to childcare, to preparing food, to building homes, EVERYONE makes a difference.



ADVOCATE

Attend community meetings and build relationships with others who care about affordable housing. Contact gtrent@cvillehabitat.org.



DONATE

Help build a more equitable and sustainable Charlottesville. Make a gift to your community today.

www.cvillehabitat.org