History of Habitat for Humanity of Greater New Haven

In the mid 1980’s, the city of New Haven had a growing problem. Many families were leaving the City and, as each one left, the city appeared more run down and more abandoned. Two neighbors in the Hill section were determined to do what they could to reverse the downward trend in the city they both valued. Bonaventure (Butch) Console and Charles (Chuck) Shepard gathered a group of like-minded community leaders to find a solution. Aware of Jimmy Carter’s commitment to Habitat for Humanity, which was highly publicized at the time, the group agreed with him that responsible homeownership was the key. They decided that rescuing abandoned properties and turning them into homes in partnership with low income families was a good way to begin here in New Haven.

At the time, there were 117 Habitat affiliates in the country (compared to approximately 1,500 today) and only one other in Connecticut.

Early in 1987, three future homeowners applied for homes and were accepted. Pedro Texidor, Amado Jimenez and Francisco Torres and their friends and families began work on the required 400 hour sweat equity, side by side with board members and volunteers from the community. Progress was slow, partly because volunteers were scarce and because work had to be halted every once in a while until money was available for building supplies... and to buy ladders that reached higher than the first floor! When the first grant was received, from the New Haven Foundation (now Community Foundation for Greater New Haven), a professional carpenter was hired to help direct the volunteer workers and to work alone when there were no volunteers available. After almost two years, the house was dedicated although it continued to need additional work for several years.

Kathy Hurley, the affiliate’s first paid Executive Director, remembers the high point of the first year. It was a visit from Jimmy Carter and Millard Fuller, who conducted a march through the Hill to raise awareness and were hosted by the board of directors at a dinner in the Center Church parish house.

Many organizations and agencies have helped the New Haven affiliate to succeed, but the early supporters, including the New Haven Foundation, the New Haven Community Loan Fund, the Junior League, Bank of New Haven, United Illuminating, the Hill Development Corporation led by Courtrand Wilson, West Haven Lumber and, perhaps most of all, the City of New Haven, showed enormous faith in the fledgling group and kept the dream alive. They provided contributions of supplies, office space, money, and property. The Yale School of Architecture made a huge contribution, agreeing to partner with New Haven Habitat in 1989 in a design competition for architecture students completing their first year of study.

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT Habitat for Humanity of Greater New Haven

The first meeting to organize a new affiliate of Habitat for Humanity was held on January 22, 1986 at the Church of the Ascension in New Haven. On May 9th, 1986, Habitat for Humanity, New Haven Inc. (the organization’s first name) filed the certificate of incorporation with the Secretary of the State.
The winning design was to be built, beginning with the students themselves and then completed by volunteers, staff and homeowners. In all, seven homes were built in partnership with the Yale School of Architecture.

Not surprisingly, there have been low points in our history. There even were times when the continuation of the affiliate seemed uncertain. In the early nineties, money, property and willing volunteers were all in short supply. Two furnaces were stolen from a house in progress; the office was robbed of its computer, telephone and typewriter; and one of the homeowner families left town, leaving behind a huge mess. Construction was halted for months on several occasions and the board contemplated closing the office. However, they never really considered disbanding. Using a mailing list that numbered over 1400, they worked every possible contact and connection to obtain low interest loans and donations from Habitat International, and many generous and dedicated individuals. Warehouse space at the New Haven Terminal was donated, allowing the affiliate to accept and store donated building supplies. During that period, new policies were adopted: no more multi-family houses were to be built; deed restrictions were implemented related to re-sales; clear family income restrictions were adopted; and a preference was given to concentrating efforts in specific neighborhoods (Newhallville & The Hill). By the middle of the decade, it was clear that the affiliate was growing and beginning to make an important contribution to New Haven.

As with all non-profit organizations, however, donations and grants, even large ones, can never supply all of the funds necessary so other sources had to be developed. Over the years, New Haven Habitat has tried many techniques, some familiar to most non-profits such as tag sales, benefit concerts, kitchen tours, wine tastings and golf tournaments and others more tailored to the Habitat mission, including the Men’s Auxiliary Bake Sale and the celebrity tool auction. All of these have been successful and some were repeated for many years. The two most successful by far have been the Habitat Bicycle Challenge and the various theme builds. For thirteen years, beginning in 1994, groups of college students rode from the East coast to the West, stopping along the way at various Habitat affiliates for work days and in innumerable small communities in order to raise awareness of the need for affordable housing. In all, over 700 students participated and they raised 2.4 million dollars for Habitat in New Haven.

In 1995, three separate groups formed, each agreeing to provide money to sponsor a house and to send volunteers to build it: the Women’s Build, whose honorary chair was Rosa DeLauro; the Collegiate Build, with students from five area colleges participating, and the Covenant Build made up of twelve local religious congregations. All of these were successfully repeated for many years. More recently, theme builds have been organized around area communities. These include Madison Cares, (Madison, Guilford and Branford), Amity Cares (Orange, Bethany and Woodbridge) and the Sleeping Giant Build (Hamden, North Haven and New Haven) with local businesses, clubs, congregations and individuals from the sponsoring community participating.

By 2001, fifteen years after the New Haven group began, there were eleven Habitat affiliates in CT, although some were quite small. Habitat International proposed that we merge with the Wallingford affiliate which had been in existence for 12 years. It was an all volunteer group that had built six homes. In late 2003, that merger was completed, with New Haven acquiring the assets of the Wallingford affiliate and making a commitment to build at least two new homes in Wallingford. The Town of Wallingford donated two building lots across the street from its Senior Center in 2005, and with a sponsorship from Liberty Bank Foundation and the help of students from Wilcox Tech and many area congregations, two single family houses were completed.

Although every Habitat home is important, there are three building projects that stand out over the last twenty-five years. In 1998 the affiliate began acquiring and rehabbing homes on Read Street in the Newhallville Neighborhood of New Haven. Between 1998 and 2003, the organization gut rehabbed six historic homes in partnership with six terrific families. Read Street had a troubled reputation and by carefully placing stable homeowners in key properties, these families created a blockwatch with their neighbors, got involved with the neighborhood management team and transformed a four block radius. A variety of sponsors, including the Collegiate Build, NewAlliance Bank, The Connecticut Building Congress, and Citizens Bank provided the core funding for those homes.

Between 2004 and 2005, the organization completed three homes on Frances Hunter Drive as part of the creation of a new neighborhood off Dixwell Avenue. Those

In 1995, the organization changed its name to Habitat for Humanity of Greater Haven.

**Interesting Facts About Habitat for Humanity of Greater New Haven**
homes were unique in the affiliate’s history because they are all fully ADA accessible and tailored to the needs of the families chosen as homeowners. We were proud to be a part of that new neighborhood; plus it was a positive experience to serve families who have needs beyond our typical Habitat home design. NewAlliance Foundation and the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston were primary sponsors of those homes.

Many people associated with Habitat have been hearing about the Rosette Street home building project for years. Rosette Street is a short street located off Howard Avenue in the Hill Neighborhood. In the 1990s, Habitat rehabbed a large number of historic homes on Spring Street. Based on that success, Rosette Street, being immediately adjacent, was the next logical step. In 2002-2003 the organization acquired two homes next door to each other, and those homes were sponsored by the Covenant Build. On the next block down, 96-110 Rosette, each piece was acquired slowly. Finally, in 2006 the organization selected homeowners and began building five homes, covering the whole block. The last home was transferred to its new homeowner in January, 2008. A total of seven total homes on Rosette Street, a once tough street, had been transformed by homeowners who actively worked to improve their quality of living. The organization won the Leveraging Award in 2008 from the Connecticut Community Development Association for the Rosette Street homes. Major sponsors included Knights of Columbus, Connecticut Building Congress, Madison Cares, Amity Cares, NewAlliance Foundation, Health Net of the Northeast, Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston, and the Habitat Bicycle Challenge.

In the last two years, the organization has set its sights on developing the north section of the Hill Neighborhood. With good public transportation and close proximity to downtown and Yale-New Haven Hospital, this is an ideal location for Habitat families. Years ago, we began building homes in Hill North on Hallock Street. More recently, homes were completed on Wilson Street and Sylvan Avenue. We are currently building homes on the nearby streets of Orchard and Elliot and additional properties will be acquired before the year’s end. By the end of 2011, twelve homes will have been completed in Hill North. Thank you to our current major sponsors for partnering with us: Yale-New Haven Hospital, NewAlliance Foundation, Madison Cares,

Sleeping Giant Build, Bank of America, Home Depot Foundation, the Skills for Life program and all its funders, and Webster Bank.

Over the past 25 years, Habitat has built 82 homes and accomplished a great deal in the greater New Haven area, but looking ahead, we see that there is still much more to do. We hope to continue such partnerships as the current one with the Youth Continuum which teaches job skills as well as building a house. We are also open to the idea of building outside of the City of New Haven as we have in Hamden and Wallingford. If we are to succeed at eliminating poverty housing, we must expand our impact on the community. With the help of our dedicated partners and sponsors and our many able volunteers, we are confident that we can realize our vision, one house, one family at a time.

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**Interesting Facts**

**Habitat for Humanity of Greater New Haven**

The organization’s telephone number, (203) 785-0794 was established in 1986 (and remains the same today).