

# Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity: Love into Action

by Sandra Chambers

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It's 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning. Fifteen volunteers have gathered at a building site near Princess Place and Mosley Drive in Wilmington. Friendly "hellos" are quickly exchanged before a foreman divides the workers into small groups and hands out the day's assignments. All the supplies needed to add a porch to the nearly completed house have been assembled and laid out in an orderly fashion. Nearby, two white utility trucks house a variety of tools.

A sign in front of the house identifies it as a Cape Fear Habitat house, one of 32 homes being constructed in the 5-acre subdivision known as the Cottages at Cornerstone.

Although Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity has built 80 houses in New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender counties since it was first founded 20 years ago, Habitat's executive director, Barbara Birkenheuer, says the Cottages at Cornerstone is something new. "It's an exciting project for us — a first," says Birkenheuer. "At Cornerstone, we're building a whole community instead of just individual houses on individual sites."

## **Putting Love in the Mortar Joints**

Founded in 1987 by Reid and Linda Murchison, Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity partners with local businesses, churches, service organizations, volunteers and individual donors to build new homes with the goal of helping to end substandard housing and offer homeownership to families that could not otherwise afford it.

"Habitat is an unabashedly Christian ministry — a way to put love into action," Reid Murchison told more than 250 attendees at the May 15th annual Golden Hammer Breakfast, a local fundraiser where \$100,235 was pledged for the upcoming year. "We offer people a hand up, not a handout, and we put love in the mortar joints of every house we build."

"One of the most common misunderstandings about Habitat is that we give away houses for free," says Birkenheuer. "Recipients of Habitat homes are not given their homes — they actually partner with us. They must pay the monthly mortgage and contribute 'sweat equity' hours — working not only on their own home, but on other homes as well."

"We were involved in building six houses before we received our Habitat house in 2004," say Charlie and Shirley Greene. "We put in 400 man hours nailing, painting, cleaning, laying foundations and flooring," Shirley remembers.

She says they applied to Habitat for a house because more than half of their income went for rent, and they barely had enough money left each month to buy food and clothes for their two grandchildren, ages 4 and 5, who live with them. "Also, the area where we lived was not a safe place for children."

Shirley says she is so thankful that whenever Habitat asks her to do anything, she doesn't hesitate. "The Lord is blessing that organization, and through it lives are being changed," she says. "I do know that for a fact — it's not something I heard — it's something that I see each and every day."

In order to qualify for a Habitat home, candidates must go through several steps, including an interview with Habitat's Family Selection Committee. The committee considers applicants currently living in overcrowded conditions, high crime areas and other substandard housing conditions. Recipients must have a job and have income levels 25-60 percent below the median income. They must also be able to afford a monthly mortgage payment of approximately \$400. "There are currently 100 people who have applied for a Habitat house, with 15 on the qualified list," says Birkenheuer. Once a family has qualified for a house, the next step is to find the land, obtain a sponsor or monies to build the house and recruit volunteers.

## **Volunteers Speak Out**

"We currently have 150 regular volunteers who assist at least once a week at a build," says Juliet Hale, Habitat's volunteer coordinator. Hale stresses that volunteers don't need to have any particular skills — just a big heart and a willingness to work. Women are welcome. "I have

two couples who volunteer together. One of the women, Mrs. Rosemarie Caputo, who is 70 years old, loves to dig footers," says Hale, "and wants to be called whenever we dig." Duane Luse, 76, from Landfall, has been a volunteer with Habitat for the past 11 years. While he has worked with many charitable organizations, Luse says it was usually serving on some board or sitting in meetings getting frustrated. "Habitat offers hands-on experience where I can see things happening," Luse stresses. "Also, part of the joy of working with Habitat is working shoulder to shoulder with the future homeowners, as well as the other volunteers. We're like one big happy family!"

Otis Johnson, 69, also from Landfall, has been working with Habitat for about eight months. He says that most of the people he knows in his Landfall neighborhood give back to the community in some form or another. "For me, Habitat is the best way I've found to give back," Johnson says. "It's a very worthwhile, concrete kind of project where you can see the results of your labor. And people don't mind donating their time because Habitat is such a well-run organization."

Johnson also confesses that another reason for donating his time is that it's therapeutic. "As we near retirement, we all need something to look forward to," he admits. "I've also met a lot of interesting people, and there's a sense of community that pulls everyone together. I think I'm actually benefiting more than I'm giving to them."

Jim Hodge, 64, of Wrightsville Beach, couldn't agree more. "I'm a frustrated carpenter," admits Hodge. "As a kid, I always wanted to be a carpenter, and now I have that opportunity. I'm giving back and learning something about building houses at the same time."

#### **Opportunities to Give**

If you don't want to, or can't work on construction, there are numerous other ways to become involved. Habitat is always recruiting volunteers to work in its Home Store, to help with the Lunch Bunch Group that provides lunches on Saturdays for the workers, for clerical work and for various Habitat committees.

"There are so many different ways to give to Habitat," stresses Kitty Yerkes, resource development director. People can be a part of the Groundbreakers Club and donate \$50 every time ground is broken on a new house. Or several businesses can partner together to sponsor an entire house for \$50,000. Since the Home Store pays all administrative overhead costs, every donation goes directly toward building houses.

Cape Fear Habitat sponsors several fundraisers throughout the year, including an annual Golden Hammer Breakfast, a Luncheon and Fashion Show, an Oktoberfest, a Turkey Trot and a golf tournament. And to celebrate its 20th anniversary, a unique fundraiser is being planned. "We will be having a Vintage Window Auction on December 2 at the St. Thomas Preservation Hall," says Birkenheuer. "All the windows have been donated from houses in the historic district that were being renovated, and over 20 local artists are decorating the windows in their particular medium to be auctioned off at this event."

#### **Breaking the Cycle of Poverty**

"Through Habitat, we're breaking the cycle of poverty, fostering a sense of pride and helping families become a viable part of their community," Birkenheuer insists.

"Research has shown that children growing up in a home that is owned by their parents have different goals and expectations. They do better in school. They have a quiet place to study and a safe place to grow up, and many have gone on to college and technical schools, and have become homeowners themselves."

Speaking at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Cottages at Cornerstone, Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity International, urged participants not to allow their successes to keep them from doing even greater things. "We cannot afford to squander any part of the next generation," he said. "We should make sure we provide all children everything they need to become all they can be in life. A house is not everything, but it is a foundation."

When a house is completed, there is a dedication ceremony attended by Habitat staff, volunteers, friends and the new owners. "It's the culmination of a year of effort," Birkenheuer says. "We have a pastor bless the house and pray over each room. Then the owners speak, and there's usually not a dry eye in the house! I remember one new owner who said, 'I have blisters on my hands, but I don't want them to go away because I want my children to see them as a reminder.'"

"We were on the waiting list for over a year," says Candace Lineback, who recently moved with her husband and teenage daughter into their new home. "Then we put in many hours of 'sweat equity' working on other people's houses before we got ours." But like many Habitat homeowners, the Linebacks plan to

continue to volunteer with Habitat. "We are just so grateful for the opportunity to become homeowners," says Candace, "It's a dream come true for all of us!" For more information on donating to or volunteering with Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity, call (910) 762-4744 or visit its Web site at [www.capefearhabitat.org](http://www.capefearhabitat.org).

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## UNCW Students Habitat

The UNCW chapter of Habitat for Humanity partners with the Cape Fear chapter to help build houses as well as raise funds. UNCW chapter president Naomi Kemper says the group has 30 to 35 active members who volunteer one Saturday a month. "We usually have more girls than guys show up at the worksites," Kemper says.

The group also assists with several fundraisers, including the annual Oktoberfest, which will be held this year at Independence Mall on October 26. The college chapter also sponsors a Battle of the Bands with four local bands and a wood sale each semester at Lowe's on College Road. "We sell two-by-fours for \$5 each, on which people can write what they want," Kemper explains. "Some people put company names, others write dedications and kids like to draw pictures with magic markers. The two-by-fours are then used in the actual houses that Habitat builds."

While the group has worked side by side with Cape Fear Habitat volunteers on many local builds, director Barbara Birkenheuer recently announced that in the fall of 2007, the UNCW chapter will get to build its own house.

Kemper says she volunteers because she wants to help less fortunate people. "I feel like I have so much," says Kemper, "and volunteering is a good way to get to know people and to see how much people really care about the community." — *Sandra Chambers*

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## Habitat for Humanity International

Habitat for Humanity International was founded in 1976 by Millard and Linda Fuller, who left a successful business in Montgomery, Alabama, to begin a new life of Christian service. In 1965, the Fullers visited Koinonia Farm, a small, interracial, Christian farming community in Americus, Ga. Together with Koinonia Farm founder Clarence Jordan, they developed the concept of "partnership housing" — where those in need of adequate shelter would work side by side with volunteers to build simple, decent houses.

"What the poor need is not charity, but capital," Millard explained. "And what the rich need is a wise, honorable and just way of divesting themselves of their overabundance."

That same basic concept became the foundational philosophy of Habitat for Humanity International, which the Fullers founded in 1976. Habitat for Humanity believes that substandard housing is morally, religiously, politically, socially and economically unacceptable. To date, the organization has built more than 200,000 homes and has more than 2,000 affiliates in more than 90 countries, including all 50 states. Cape Fear Habitat for Humanity is one of 76 affiliate chapters in North Carolina. — *Sandra Chambers*