

Habitat for Humanity Milledgeville-Baldwin County Improving Neighborhoods

One House at a Time

Homeownership is an American dream that might elude many if not for the efforts of Milledgeville-Baldwin County Habitat for Humanity (MBCHFH). The organization, a local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI), incorporated in 1994 and has assisted over eighteen families in securing safe, affordable housing.

MBCHFH Executive Director Murali Thirumal, a native Sri Lankan, understands the need for safe and affordable housing. "Having grown up in a developing country I witnessed extreme poverty firsthand. Eradicating substandard housing is very close to my heart," stated Thirumal.

Thirumal came to the United States in 1986 to study at Georgia College (GC). After completing a Master of Science in Biology degree, he worked at Lockerby Arboretum for eighteen years, including three as executive director. He also served as the executive officer for Landforce-an information technology company-for more than thirteen years. He has served as Habitat executive director for the past two years.

A Place to Call Home

Habitat families are carefully prescreened to ensure they meet the criteria set by the organization: a need for adequate housing, the ability to pay for the home, and a willingness to partner with Habitat by completing a minimum of 300 hours of sweat equity labor. The new homes are sold with no profit added, and a twenty-year, zero percent

interest mortgage. Habitat administers the mortgages and works with partner families over the course of the loan.

Judy Hurt was a volunteer on the very first Habitat home built in Milledgeville and was the recipient of the second house constructed. She acknowledges MBCHFH with giving her family a better life. "Habitat is simply awesome," states Hurt. "Because of this organization my children have a beautiful, safe home to grow up in. They can bring their friends over and have a sense of pride about where they live."

All Habitat homeowners are required to work alongside volunteers constructing their homes. . Hurt says she immensely enjoyed her time spent putting "sweat equity" into her home. She learned how to lay flooring, hang drywall, and paint.

She adds the volunteers she worked with were incredibly inspiring. "I met so many wonderful people who helped me build my home. They could have been anywhere yet they were there helping me."

Revitalization of Neighborhoods

In recent years, emphasis shifted inside HFHI from building new homes to revitalizing entire neighborhoods. Locally, efforts are being focused on improving the historic Harrisburg neighborhood.

Endeavors under the Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) will include helping residents make improvements to their homes. Homeowners will have to meet all current application criteria to receive assistance.

Work under the NRP could include but not limited to repair, painting, and yard improvements. “The revitalization program energizes a community and has a larger impact than a new home build,” states Thirumal.

Baldwin County Commissioner Tommie French credits the NRP with giving citizens hope where none existed. “When bits and pieces of a neighborhood improve, there is a chain reaction of homeowners making improvement,” says French.

French, also a MBCHFH board member, adds: “These improvements are not just physical but economical, educational, psychological and cultural, as well.”

For Ed Weimer, board president, this initiative is not only important, it is imperative. “The best way to improve an overall community is to start with those most in need,” stated Weimer. “As we are able to revitalize neighborhoods within our community, it will provide a firmer foundation for all families, leading to better educational opportunities, better employment opportunities, and better all-around citizens.”

Volunteers Make Habitat Happen

Volunteers are at the heart of Habitat’s success with not only individuals but many community organizations giving their time to make sure others have appropriate shelter.

“Habitat (MBCHFH) would have ceased to exist many years ago without a sound volunteer corps,” stressed Thirumal. “In 2014, the time contributed by volunteers equals 1.75 full-time employees, or \$80, 990.”

Habitat draws upon the talents and youthful enthusiasm of students from GC to assist the organization in public relations, social media, and of course in building and remodeling homes.

GC has a Habitat campus chapter that engages students in the community working with the local affiliate. The students conduct fundraisers and marketing events in support of MBCHFH while getting to know the neighboring community.

A former employee of MBCHFH and GC alumna, Maggie Milner, is the liaison between the affiliate and the campus chapter. "I loved my time with Habitat; the students had a huge role in that," says Milner. "I love seeing them want to give to the community they are living in while getting to know the citizens of the city as well."

Milner stresses the relationship benefits both the students and Habitat. She adds, "You never know what relationships-personal or businesswise-may come from it."

Local houses of worship also provide a steady stream of dedicated volunteers who bring skill and experience to each build and remodel. The First United Methodist Church of Milledgeville (FUMCM) has completed numerous projects for Habitat through their River of Life (ROL) ministry.

"ROL hopes to teach future generations what it means to be blessed and bless others through service," states ROL Coordinator Marty Sirmans. Many missions for Habitat have taken place in the Harrisburg community, including repainting and repair of homes, building wheelchair ramps and porches, and yard clean up.

Kudzu-the campus ministry of Northridge Christian Church (NCC)-is another faith-based organization teaming up with Habitat to better lives in our area. This spring, Kudzu plans to assist in renovating a house in Harrisburg as well.

“Harrisburg is a neighborhood that NCC is already connected to. It made sense to join with Habitat to build a stronger community within Milledgeville,” stated Kudzu Campus Minister Mandy Cook.

Helping Habitat

Adjacent to the MBCHFH office is the ReStore-a place where your shopping will assist families in building better lives. The affiliate takes donations of gently used furniture, artwork, decorative pieces, and new building supplies. The items are then sold at a reasonable price, and 100% of the profit goes back into the organization.

The ReStore is managed by Brian Elliot, yet another GC student that wanted to make a difference locally. Elliot started volunteering with Habitat as part of his Business Ethics class but remained with the nonprofit long after the requirements were fulfilled. He says, “I had to volunteer at least ten hours with a charity for the class. I got to know Habitat well and loved the mission and work.”

Elliot believed in Habitat so strongly that he recruited a close friend, Ishmael Hemphill, to volunteer as well. “I have volunteered my entire life, and when Brian started working here I knew I wanted to get involved as well,” said Hemphill.

Elliot and Hemphill pick up donations, arrange the items within the store, and make sure customers know they are getting a good deal while helping others. “Having the

ReStore here links Habitat to the community,” adds Hemphill. “People can buy good quality items and fundraise for a great cause while doing it.”

For more information on the Milledgeville-Baldwin County Habitat, log onto their website at www.milledgevillehabitat.org or visit the office and ReStore located at 730 North Wayne Street.