



Dorothy Howard's home.

*“When I walked in, I stopped. The tears just started rolling. I never thought in a million years that I would be able to own a home.”*

– Dorothy Howard

# Habitat for Humanity and its Home in Houston

By Christine Nguyen



Dorothy Howard, Houston Habitat for Humanity's first home owner, receives a framed copy of the deed to her home marked paid.

Photo courtesy of Houston Habitat for Humanity.

Imagine one woman raising eight grandchildren in a cramped apartment with only one bathroom. This everyday struggle was reality for Dorothy Howard, whose days began first thing in the morning with the chaotic scramble to the lone bathroom, while every night some of the children shared bunk beds and others slept on the floor.<sup>1</sup> Howard pieced together a living for the family of nine from disability and children's benefits, but it never amounted to enough to sleep easily. On December 24, 1988, everything changed. Dorothy Howard became the first Habitat for Humanity homeowner in Houston, Texas. What a dramatic difference it made for her and her eight grandchildren to move into a one-story, four-bedroom house and to have a yard for the first time!<sup>2</sup>

## HISTORY

Habitat for Humanity is an international non-profit organization that assists low-income families in building new homes and new lives to reduce poverty housing around the world. The organization focuses on two goals. The first is to build as many houses as it can, using the principles of sweat equity, no interest, no profit, volunteer-driven construction in every corner of the globe. Today Habitat is completing a house somewhere every twenty-six minutes (20,000 per year). Second, Habitat attempts to make housing a matter of conscience everywhere. Habitat wants everyone to understand that it is morally and socially unacceptable for any human being not to have a simple, decent place to sleep at night.<sup>3</sup>

Approximately 1.6 billion people globally lack adequate shelter. Habitat for Humanity envisions a world where everyone has a decent place to live. It contends that a house

is more than just four walls and a roof, and operates on the belief that a safe, secure, and affordable home changes lives. A home helps people live healthier, it keeps children in school, and it gives families opportunities. A stable home helps break the endless cycle of poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Millard Fuller and his wife Linda conceived Habitat for Humanity in 1976 at Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. When the Fullers first arrived at Koinonia Farm in 1965, they had just given up their pursuit of money and were searching for a new purpose to dedicate their lives. Millard met Clarence Jordan, the farm's primary founder, and learned of his mission to practice the teachings of Jesus, "especially with regard to loving all people and caring for the poor."<sup>5</sup> In the 1940s through the 1960s, the South maintained a social structure dominated by whites. While slaves had gained their freedom in 1865, African Americans continued to fight for their civil rights and equality. "All people" often did not include blacks. Jordan and the residents of Koinonia, on the other hand, treated all equally despite societal prejudices, and that is a standard that Habitat for Humanity continues to uphold. Under the hammer, there is no discrimination.

In 1981, nine miles away from Americus, Georgia, former President Jimmy Carter and wife Rosalyn Carter returned to their home in Plains, Georgia, at the end of his term. Wanting to continue his commitment to social justice, promoting human rights, and relieving human suffering, Habitat for Humanity piqued Carter's interest as he realized Habitat's mission closely aligned with his and his wife's values. Therefore, in 1984, the couple became official partners of Habitat for Humanity, advocating for and supporting the

Former President Jimmy Carter, shown here at the Carter Work Project in Houston in 1998, and his wife Rosalynn Carter have been tireless advocates for Habitat for Humanity, pitching in to help on many build sites over the years.

Photo courtesy of Habitat for Humanity International.



organization through the Carter Work Project, an annual week-long building blitz. The Carters not only donated resources, but they also donated their time.

Carter was seen on jobsites willing to pick up a hammer alongside the volunteers, and this image of a former president with the people started a movement with Habitat for Humanity. Habitat reports, “To date, President and Mrs. Carter have served with over 92,260 volunteers in fourteen countries to build, renovate and repair 3,944 homes.”<sup>6</sup> The Carters’ involvement brought Habitat for Humanity national visibility and recognition, fostering the organization’s growth into what it is today with affiliate headquarters across the nation and the world.

*“I can walk down the aisles of airplanes, talking with people, and invariably the number-one thing that everybody says is, ‘Tell me about Habitat.’”*

—President Jimmy Carter<sup>7</sup>

## HABITAT FOR HUMANITY LANDS IN HOUSTON

Carl Umland was an environmental health coordinator for Exxon when the company relocated him and his family to Houston, where Umland started the Habitat for Humanity affiliation in 1987. He served as its first president for six years and helped the organization become the largest non-profit housing builder in the city.<sup>8</sup> After a year of trial and error, the organization dedicated its first home to Dorothy Howard in 1988.

In 1998, The Jimmy Carter Work Project landed in Houston with a goal to build one hundred Habitat for Humanity homes in one week — the largest effort attempted in the United States. Six thousand volunteers nailed together over 500,000 linear feet of lumber, used 15,000 pounds of nails, applied 4,500 gallons of paint, and drank over 35,000 gallons of water in the Houston heat alongside the former U.S. president. At the end of the week, the count of Habitat houses in Houston had nearly tripled from the 52 houses standing seven days prior. Today, Houston Habitat for Humanity (HHFH) has built over one thousand homes,

housing over 3,980 people. HHFH builds 30 to 50 new EnergySTAR energy efficient homes annually and repairs 30 to 50 older homes. Charity Navigator designated HHFH among Houston charities as number one in effectiveness based on overall scores for financial performance, transparency, and accountability.<sup>9</sup>

Houston Habitat’s houses were developed primarily in the Fifth Ward, and it continues to build largely in that area, such as the Settegast neighborhood, but also builds in the northwest and southeast sides of the city. As families begin to settle into more permanent homes thanks to HHFH, these neighborhoods begin to see more resources invested there, as evidenced in facilities like grocery stores and schools. These amenities complete the chain of stability because families then have access to healthier foods and improved educational opportunities that will allow them to break the cycle of poverty. The children have a 74 percent greater chance of completing high school and twice the percentage of receiving a higher education.<sup>10</sup> As a result financial stability becomes an attainable goal due to HHFH’s no interest, zero percent mortgage, and energy efficient design model.

Habitat homes are not simply given away. Once qualified applicants are chosen, they attend classes to learn how to be successful first-time homeowners. After closing on the home, the families pay the insurance, taxes, and mortgage on the home like any other homeowners. The future homeowners also participate in three hundred hours of “sweat equity,” which means Habitat families are working alongside the staff and volunteers on the build site constructing the homes. This policy teaches the homeowners basic house construction skills and provides a sense of pride and entitlement given the hard work they accomplish to earn their new home.

Habitat for Humanity boasts the motto “build homes, change lives” and indeed that is what they do. Not only does the organization positively impact the city, the homeowners, and the community, it also leaves a lasting impression on the volunteers. Stephen Sye, director of development and volunteer coordinator at HHFH, recalls one of the first times he showed a family their new home. Stephen asked



Getting a home ready, such as this one being built in 2011, is a group undertaking. Homeowners contribute 300 hours of “sweat equity,” working with the build staff and volunteers; they learn about homeownership, and pay the insurance, taxes, and mortgage like all homeowners.

Photo courtesy of Houston Habitat for Humanity.



*On March 25, 2011, Houston Habitat for Humanity dedicated a solar-powered home to the Hillard and Jones family alongside sponsors Pride International and Green Mountain Energy Company. Pride International and Houston Habitat partnered to build the home and upgrade it with a ten-panel solar system. Green Mountain, through its Big Texas Sun Club, provided a solar-powered hot water heater.*

Photo courtesy of Houston Habitat for Humanity.

one of the young boys to show him which bedroom was his. Running to a bedroom, the boy stood in the closet. While Stephen understood that was the bedroom, he did not understand why the boy was standing in the closet. The boy's older brother then told Stephen that his little brother did not understand that the whole room was his because where they lived previously, they slept in the closet. This story illustrates the impact Habitat for Humanity has had on Sye, but with every home built, a similar story surfaces that is just as powerful. Sye caught what he calls "habititis" and has been with Habitat for eight years since that encounter, continuing to make a world of difference with Houston Habitat for Humanity.<sup>11</sup>

Many volunteers catch "habititis." Habitat for Humanity is a predominantly volunteer-based organization; change would not be possible without the help of these individuals. It is easy to become a volunteer with a local affiliate; no experience is required to help build a Habitat house. Being on



*The University of Houston Habitat for Humanity Campus Chapter members work to assemble a new home.*

Photo courtesy of author.

the construction site alongside the families and build staff is a rewarding experience. Day after day, the friendly faces of the Habitat build staff are working to build homes and change lives. One of the men spoke about his past year in the Habitat neighborhood under construction in Settegast. He is amazed that when he began only two houses had been completed and now, a year later, the street of over thirty houses has come to life in a short period of time. He adds that he will not be going anywhere because he wants to see more.<sup>12</sup> The energy on the construction sites is contagious, and it has kept the organization going strong for thirty years.

## **HABITAT FOR WHOM?**

Habitat for Humanity strives to deliver on its mission to provide spiritual fulfillment to its volunteers as well as improving new homeowners' lives. While some people catch "habititis," others have reservations about the effectiveness and efficiency of Habitat for Humanity's home building process and the effect on the families. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, Habitat for Humanity promised to build and repair as many homes as it could pay for, "hopefully in the thousands," said CEO of Habitat for Humanity Jonathan Reckford. The organization quickly gathered 50,000 volunteers, raised \$127 million, and attracted prominent backers like President George H. W. Bush and the New Orleans jazz luminaries Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis. However, a year and a half later, only 702 homes were built or under construction along the coast from Alabama to Texas. The organization began to face criticism that its procedures were slow, rigid, and, perhaps, not suited for helping disaster victims. Nonetheless, Habitat for Humanity has helped relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina. Kenneth J. Meinert, a senior vice president of Habitat for Humanity, says, "Along the Gulf Coast, we had built 57 homes a year, now we're building 57 a month... In these conditions, to have built 700 homes, it's an absolute work of God."<sup>13</sup>

Some have further questioned the organization's emphasis on building from scratch rather than rebuilding and repairing damaged homes. Habitat for Humanity is made up of autonomous affiliates that operate like a franchise. Some local affiliates, like Karen Cleveland in Habitat North Virginia, have taken the initiative of repairing and rebuilding homes that can cost 25 percent of a new home construction. She encourages flexibility for more rehabilitation initiatives, but it is still a work in progress.<sup>14</sup>

On the other side of the construction debate are the families who will occupy these new homes. Habitat for Humanity does not give houses away; twenty-year no-interest mortgages are provided and the payments are used to finance more houses. To qualify, families must have incomes well below the median for their areas but steady enough to cover mortgages. Along with good credit and, in some areas, several thousand dollars to cover taxes and insurance, unsuccessful applicants become frustrated with the strict requirements. Even for those applicants who become new homeowners, banks, brokers, and mortgage services target these families to take advantage of their financial naivety. Habitat affiliates in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Columbus,



*Coog's House has been more than just another house. The UH students have reframed HHHF's view of building. The new design takes traditional building methods and materials and uses them in an unconventional way to produce a house that is still affordable, more sustainable, and aesthetically pleasing.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston College of Architecture and Design Coog's House Design team.

Ohio, say many clients are getting mail solicitations that look to be from Habitat but are not. Critics say Habitat is not set up to deal with homeowners' problems that could lead to detrimental consequences for the new homeowners. On the other hand, Spokesman Duane Bates notes that foreclosures are rare, with the national rate under 2 percent. He adds that, as part of the affiliate's procedures, Habitat offers education and training to prepare and inform new homeowners to make better choices.<sup>15</sup>

## STUDENTS FOR CHANGE AND COOG'S HOUSE

Along with building and helping individuals become new homeowners, Habitat for Humanity aims to advocate and educate the community about poverty housing and the need for adequate shelter for all. A large part of breeding this value at an early stage is through campus chapters at the high school and collegiate level. Each campus chapter is a student-led, student-initiated organization that partners with their local Habitat for Humanity to fulfill the four functions of a campus chapter: direct service through volunteering, fundraising, advocating, and educating.<sup>16</sup> Houston Habitat for Humanity has campus chapters at the collegiate level at Texas A&M Prairie View, Rice University, and the University of Houston Main Campus.

Four years ago, I got an email that said two students were looking for an executive team to reestablish a campus chapter at the University of Houston. Coincidentally at the time, I had been thinking about how to get involved with Habitat for Humanity again. A few weeks later, I found myself part of a team with a common goal to make a difference and reestablish Habitat for Humanity as a campus organization. At the time, the Rice University campus chapter had recently completed their Centennial House Project, a student-run effort that brought the Rice community together to design, fund, and build a new Habitat for Humanity home. Rice architecture students, Yoni Pressman and Courtney Benzon, designed the home to demonstrate the compatibility of sustainability and affordability of a low-cost home, and the community joined them to support their endeavors to honor and renew Rice's commitment to volunteerism as it entered its second century.<sup>17</sup> Inspired by Rice University and fueled by friendly competition, the University of Houston campus



UH students on a build site show their school spirit, flashing the "Go Coogs!" sign.

Photo courtesy of author.



*Coog's House was designed not only to meet HHHF's EnergySTAR requirements but also exceed them. This house has the potential to be certified as a LEED Gold home, which stands for Leader in Energy Efficient Design and evaluates the sustainability of buildings. Shown left to right are design team students Erika Chan, Cindy Nguyen, Christine Nguyen, and Taylor Rigsby.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston College of Architecture and Design Coog's House Design team.

chapter quickly took on the project to design and build a new home for Habitat for Humanity and another low-income family.

As an architecture student, I took it upon myself to see what the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design (UHCOAD) could do to jumpstart this large project. Chan Huynh, a design studio professor at the UHCOAD, quickly became involved and offered to open a summer design studio for students to design the house for Habitat for Humanity and get credit toward their architecture degree. Subsequently, Professor Huynh volunteered to teach a follow-up elective class using the new house design to teach students how to produce construction documents – a necessary step for the house to become a reality. In less than a month, we opened a design studio for the summer 2015 semester and guaranteed a house designed for Houston Habitat for Humanity.

The students in the studio worked in teams and produced three very different designs that all demonstrate low-income homes do not have to sacrifice aesthetics and that, with thoughtful design, they can be affordable, enjoyable, and sustainable. Working in teams and having Habitat for Humanity as our client, we gained valuable skills beyond designing that we can apply in the work force. The students received real-life experiences as they worked with Houston Habitat throughout the entire process. As the project continues to develop, more and more students will be involved throughout the campus. The project quickly adopted the name "Coog's House" in reference to it being a student-led project of the University of Houston Cougars — conceived by students, designed by students, built by students.

Coog's House will continue to enhance the education experience by providing students an opportunity for hands-on experience in home design and the added value of participating in the application of their creation through an actual home build. The involvement of campus chapters with Habitat for Humanity utilizes the students as the future for the organization, the community, and ultimately, the world.

Coog's House planted a seed of excitement in Houston Habitat for opportunities to think beyond the traditional methods of design and construction the organization has been accustomed to for the last forty years.<sup>18</sup> While it is true the students at the University of Houston hope to change the life of one family by building Coog's House, the value in the project goes beyond a single home — it will set a higher standard for sustainable and affordable housing that all have a right to own.

The UH campus chapter wants to engage as many students, faculty, staff, alumni, supporters, and members of the community as possible as chapter members complete the Coog's House Project to make a difference and contribute to the reduction of poverty housing.

Habitat for Humanity has been building homes and changing lives for forty years. The organization was conceived with the belief that all have a right to decent housing, and that under the hammer, there is no discrimination. Today, people from every walk of life can be seen on the build sites volunteering for Habitat for Humanity and helping families begin a new stage in their lives. Hearing the different stories about the families and their new homes is rewarding. Although every story is different, they all have one thing in common: gratitude. Through Habitat for Humanity and the volunteers, these families have gained hope and experienced positive change in their lives and in their community.

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