

Lordy, it was cold! 7 below zero in February 1993. I was scanning the local paper in Rock Island, Illinois and came to an article about a local church that was soliciting people to go to Florida and help rebuild after Hurricane Andrew devastated south Florida and particularly the city of Homestead. I enlisted for a week but later changed that week for two consecutive weeks.

I arrived at the Minnie Mannford Retreat Center located just a few miles north of Homestead, on Krome Ave., later that month. The site had a kitchen and dining room along with a few tents, shelters and one cabin used by those lucky enough to have arrived earlier. We were divided into work groups and most were sent to the city to work on homes for the families who had lost theirs to the hurricane. I remained on site and began to build dorms to house the volunteers, and did this for the next two weeks.

This was my introduction to Habitat for Humanity.

After Chris, my wife, and I finished our new home on the shores of Lake Henderson, I began to feel the need to do something. My golf game wasn't getting any better. Newspaper again: "Needed: volunteers to build houses for Habitat for Humanity Citrus County Inc." That was the cry I was looking for, a chance to clobber and darken my fingernails again. In 1998 I worked on the house on Monroe St. It was dedicated for the family and in that year the only home built. It was hard to get prospective homeowners to begin the program and equally hard to raise monies for the home if we did get the Partner Family involved. Citrus County had land, a lot of land that mom 'n pop bought for their retirement but never quite got around to developing. Wills left this property to their heirs and they dutifully paid taxes until they questioned themselves, why?

Thus began our land acquisition. Dan Groner was our go-to guy for property. He began writing letters to owners advising them of the possibilities of donating land to Habitat. Lots began filling our coffers, which was good. Selling these lots was our only source of income. This practice continues to this day and thru the goodness of others we are able to continue our mission. Little by little we began to increase our yearly output of houses, one house for a couple of years, then two, then three, and so on.

Mike Crusco came to Habitat a year after I did. Our construction leadership was a mess, none. With Mike's help and leadership, he and I partnered to lead Habitat's construction schedules for the next five years. I learned a lot of construction knowledge from that man. We formed a pretty good team. He corrected me on building practices and I him on procurement. We were so broke that we played Home Depot and Lowes against each other. Each would offer 10% off if they weren't the lowest price in the county. Got 'em! They good naturedly knew exactly what was going on. The Ocala affiliate was God-sent. They had an ear to the ground and had donations of shingles, wall board, closet materials and other good junk. Plus they were kind enough to give it to our affiliate, providing we would pick it up. Building materials are heavy! And moving them four times was demanding. Once to Ocala to pick them up, unloading them to storage, loading and moving them to site, and finally installing them in or on the house. Once we left Mike in Ocala with a load of dry wall on his flat bed trailer and on the way home two tires blew out. No cell phones then. Good luck, Mike.

Executive Directors came and went, but each offered positive input and experience to the job. One left. Norm Peterson was president and assumed the duties of our business office until noon or two o'clock. Then off to the newly opened Home Store, whose manager had quit, until five, then race home, eat, clean up and race to a speaking engagement several times a week. Norm is a

lean man and he was fast becoming a leaner one, but with the help of a good woman, he managed.

Oh what can I say about our construction volunteers? Not enough praise to go round. Bill Chastain was an original member of our county's affiliate. Bill built for so long we finally made him (or did he make the job), tool manager. He retired from Habitat and now donates his time to his church. You can't keep a good man down. Over the years such a flow of men and women have answered the need for help. Just to help out for a few days, they say. We have an affliction that hangs around our construction site and it's called Habititis. Just gets in your blood and you don't want to leave.

One group of volunteers just wouldn't give up: women. Linda Daly of Daly and Zilch Construction came to Habitat and led a Woman's Build. Shirts and hats, hammers and nails they came. They came with such zest it was hard to calm them down and organize working units. I had one lady run the chop saw. Others would race to her to have a board cut at 3' and some of those little notches on the ruler. Wall board went up and dusty, white-covered faces with the largest smiles imaginable cut, hammered and screwed the pieces in place. By then they were measuring at 47 and 3/16" and not one 1/16 less or more! After I showed them how to install base board, some came out and looked perplexed. Which way was the cut to be made? Finally after consideration a plan was devised. Take said board, walk backwards out the door and present the board to be cut exactly the way it was when it laid against the wall. What beautiful ladies and what a pleasure for me to work with them.

Some time, about eight years ago, I joined the Board of Directors. Still fledging but growing, the affiliate needed a plan. Fortunately our parent, Habitat for Humanity International, has representatives who have plans available. We were tutored and the need to grow in structured ways was explained. Paid employees, office duties, accounting practices, construction procedures, seminars...we were given the insight to see to the future if all procedures are followed. And it works! We have now become a business and by doing so adhere to the practices that all businesses must. We threw the shoe box away.

Board members came and went. Sometimes we pressured people into joining when they weren't quite ready to make the commitment. Other times, they didn't realize how demanding being a Board member can be. Let's jump to the last few years. Norm Peterson interviewed and hired our present Executive Director, Terry Steele. Mr. Steele (Terry) has taken the affiliate forward from the time of his arrival to the present day. Through his and the Board's efforts we have garnered local businesses, churches, service organizations, working groups from our local industries, police groups, the National Honor Society, and a host of others from all over the community, to help us physically and financially. We have grown from that one a year home to our present commitment of 12 a year. We have in place a Board that is collectively as knowledgeable as any in our county. We are on pace to continue building well into the future.

I resigned from the Board this past June but not from Habitat. I'll continue to pound 'til the hammer becomes too heavy. Every day before I leave to work, Chris reminds me to be careful and some days I disregard her advice. Just the other day I climbed a ladder to cut a rafter tail and rammed my head into the preceding tail causing a gash one inch and some of those little notches on my forehead. Looks like it will leave a scar. But it isn't really a scar - it's a merit badge, and I'm proud to say I earned it.

Terry McMillan