

Features

Habitat harnesses student labor to build low-cost housing

By Lee Strong

Steve Royer seemed to sum up the feelings many of his fellow St. John Fisher College students held toward the houses at 45 and 47 Hollister Street.

"Now every time I drive by that street, I can say, 'Hey, I helped build those houses!'" he said.

Royer, a freshman, was among approximately 50 Fisher students — and more than 200 college students from throughout the Rochester area — who took part in the latest Flower City Habitat for Humanity home-building project. The students and other volunteers worked in shifts between September 24 and October 2 to build floors, erect walls, put in beams and roof the two houses. Interior work will continue until December, at which time two low-income families chosen to own the homes are scheduled to move in.

Tony Galeazza, the college's Student Association president, said that when he heard about the project, he pushed for Fisher students to be involved, even stopping fellow students in the halls to invite them.

"My uncle and father are contractors," he noted. "The idea of people owning their own homes means a lot to us."

Galeazza said that he was impressed when he met the families who will be moving into the houses. "These people work," he said. "They have jobs. They're not slacking off. They just didn't have opportunities."

The project had personal meaning to freshman Brenda Martin, whose brother had likewise been denied opportunities to own a house at one time, she said, so she was aware of the difficulty and frustration of trying to buy a home on a limited income. "I wanted to help people who were trying to better themselves," she said.

Cynthia Riggs, who will soon take up residence in one of the houses, has been trying to better her situation for a long time.

For many years, Riggs has dreamed of owning a home, but has never been able to afford a down payment even though she works two jobs. Meanwhile, she has watched her 12-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son grow up in the Genesee Gateway Apartments — where they come in constant contact with drugs and the violence of life in the projects. They were beginning to imitate the behavior of their peers on the streets, and that gave her added impetus to continue her search for a house.

"I kept telling everybody I was going to get a home," Riggs said. "I kept saying God would help me. I got on my knees and prayed."

Then Riggs heard about Habitat for Humanity. She applied for a house only a month ago, and was accepted to purchase one of the houses on Hollister Street.

"When they called me, I was speechless," Riggs said. "It's a miraculous gift to me; the Lord has given me a home."

Roger Cross, executive director of Flower City Habitat for Humanity, said Riggs' situation is typical of those who have been helped by the program.

"These are families that have bad credit or no money," he noted. Like Riggs, they are excited when they discover they will soon own a house. "They've applied for stuff their entire lives — they can't believe it that they can get a home with no strings attached."

Cross became involved with the Habitat for Humanity movement in 1983. Newly retired from Rochester's Gleason Works, he and his wife were heading to Florida to build their retirement home when they stopped at Americus, Georgia. There they met Millard Fuller, who 12 years ago founded the Habitat for Humanity movement.

Soon the Crosses found themselves in Florida building homes not for themselves, but for low-income families. They had become caught up in a movement that is currently conducting approximately 330 home-building projects across the United States, and is active in 19 Third-World nations.

In April of 1984, the Crosses returned to Rochester for a visit and spoke on a local radio station about what they were doing. Someone called in and suggested they start a Habitat branch here.

Nine homes — either completed or nearly completed — have already resulted from that suggestion, and at least five more houses are scheduled to begin construction in 1989.

"It looks like we're in the housing business, but we're into changing lives and giving people hope," Cross said. "It's the most exciting thing I've ever done in my life. We've heard the admonition of Our Lord that it's better to give than receive. It has new meaning to me."

The Habitat for Humanity format is simple. The first homes are built with donations



Rick Kuempel of Flower City Construction, supervisor for the Habitat for Humanity project, shows volunteers how to take measurements. Michael N. Aydogan

from local church and civic groups. Volunteer laborers build the houses, largely with materials contributed by local contractors, suppliers and other groups. Some of the lumber for the Hollister Street houses, for example, was donated by the recent Billy Graham Crusade.

A selection committee accepts applications from low-income families who could not otherwise afford to buy a house. Among the criteria for acceptance is that at least one member of the family has a job, and that people selected to receive a house agree to contribute 500 hours of "sweat equity," working on the houses or at Habitat's offices, housed at Genesee Ecumenical Ministries, 17 S. Fitzhugh St.

The new homeowners are given 20-year, no-interest mortgages, which are paid to Habitat in monthly installments of \$270. In Riggs' case, that low rate represents a sizeable savings as compared to the \$419 she's been paying in rent. These mortgage payments are then used to build more houses.

The Habitat families join homeowners' associations that meet monthly to provide mutual support and advice. Working with Habitat, the association also directs people to such services as legal aid or family and marriage counseling.

"We're not trying to compete with neighborhood associations," Cross said. "We're trying to make an impact on a neighborhood, moving people in and providing leadership for the future."

Jane Kirchner, assistant director of campus ministry at St. John Fisher College, praised Habitat for its leadership — for "enabling and empowering people who are on the brink, and helping them become part of the community."

She noted that Fisher's campus ministry supported the Hollister Street project not only because of the good work Habitat does, but because the project provided an opportunity for students to go out from the campus into the broader community, where they could learn about the struggles of people.

"It's indispensable for us as Christians to be in touch with the oppressed," Kirchner said. "We need always to be in tune with our poor and with Third-World countries to be whole Christians."

Senior Dan Ryan, a resident adviser at the college, viewed the construction project as a chance to give to others in return for opportunities he's received.

"I think it's only right that I give some of myself back," he said. Ryan was impressed that so many students were willing to go to the work site at 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning. "That kind of showed me that the students were really devoted to the cause."

He noted that the experience helped him appreciate not only the opportunities he has received, but also to recognize more completely that the less fortunate live a day-to-day struggle. Ryan also enjoyed the direct contact with the people who benefited from what he did, and from the hands-on nature of the construc-

tion project. "With other service projects, you raise the money and it goes off to the missions," he explained. With this project, however, "we were here, we met the people, we were doing something right within the community."

Galeazza pointed out that the Fisher work crew consisted not only of students, but also of Kirchner, St. John Fisher College President William Pickett, and biology professor Thomas Crombach. "To take four hours out of

their schedules to work said something," he said. "The commitment here is to help others. It's in our statement as an institution."

Ryan acknowledged that the faculty presence inspired him. "Here they were, faculty, on a Saturday morning when they didn't have to be there," he said. "They were showing me and a bunch of other people that they really cared. They showed me that they were really a part

Continued on Page 14

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