



Photos by Habitat for Humanity, New Haven

Habitat finished this new construction at 80 Sylvan Ave., New Haven, last fall. It was dedicated in November.

Habitat marks 25 years of making good homes

NEWs flash: President Jimmy Carter did not start Habitat for Humanity. But, Millard Fuller did in Carter's home state, Georgia, 15 years before Carter moved to the White House.



DUO DICKINSON

In 1986, when Habitat for Humanity had a few more than 100 affiliates in the United States, a small group of New Haveners decided it was time to have a branch here.

After 25 years, the local Habitat chapter has renovated or built about 80 homes. It is building six to seven houses a year — with an occasional renovation or house outside city limits. It may be the largest private developer of single-family New Haven housing.

While Habitat has been working here, there have been big housing projects — Monterey Place, Ninth Square, and others — with top-down, tear-down approaches that created an entirely new landscape. These were largely financed by various levels of government, often with some foundation and Yale University pitching in.

Habitat likes the opposite approach. Modest government money helps with site acquisition, and the city has been active acquiring specific properties. But, Habitat is bottom-up in every way.

Houses are built mainly with volunteer labor that is professionally managed, materials mostly are donated and residents are engaged in the building and ownership process from the beginning.

Individual lots are bought and houses built to turn their blocks around, stitching together committed homeowners to create community in the existing fabric of the neighborhood.

Beyond the small government grants, funding comes from large corporate entities, such as Yale-New Haven Hospital or NewAlliance Foundation. Towns, churches or other groups may work together to raise \$50,000 toward the \$120,000 building cost, and supply the volunteer labor.

Habitat for Humanity New Haven has seen its operation change. Initially, Yale students participated through the architecture school or fundraising, with a cross-country bike challenge. Those efforts have ended.

The opportunity remains for Yale, New Haven's most generous not-

for-profit, and one of its leading charitable causes, Habitat, to work together.

Despite changing means and methods, the mission of Habitat still is to build decent owner-occupied housing, with the owners-to-be participating in its construction.

The families of Habitat's New Haven homes volunteer a minimum of 400 hours to qualify to buy a new home at a bargain price and with the best mortgage terms. Taxes are included with each mortgage payment and routine costs of homeownership are planned and budgeted by the family after training by Habitat.

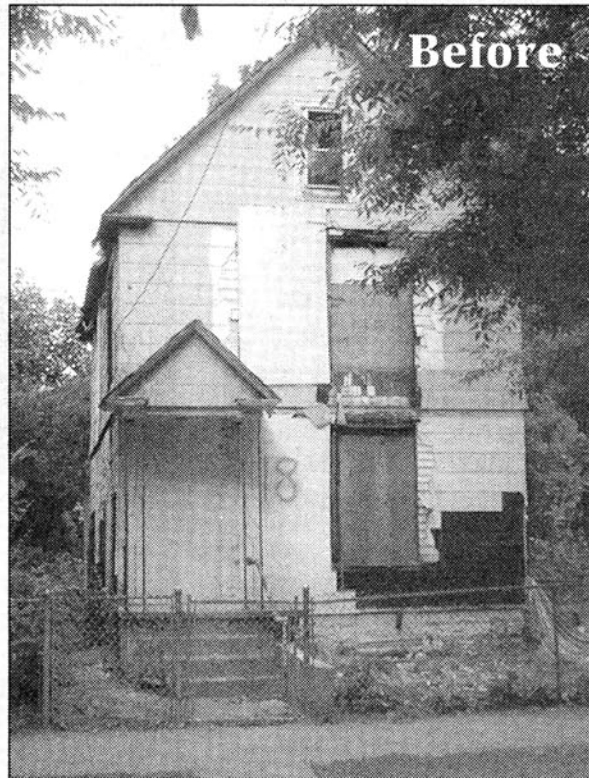
Fuller created Habitat as a deeply Christian organization, but Habitat for Humanity New Haven accepts donations from all, and its 2,000 volunteers are of every faith.

In its first decade, New Haven Habitat's mission was to rehabilitate abandoned homes to stabilize decaying blocks in the Hill and Newhallville neighborhoods. The time and money needed limited rehabs to two or three yearly, but there was a waiting list with hundreds of candidates.

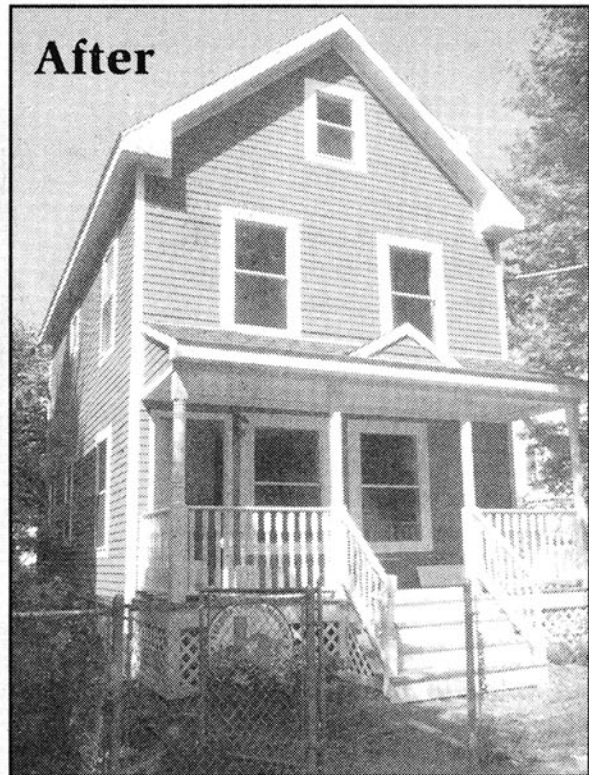
A shift in priorities in the mid-1990s coincided with Bill Casey becoming the executive director and construction manager. The last 15 years of his leadership have focused on reinventing blocks, house by house, to stabilize living conditions and property values and to provide a sense of community that is essential to make home ownership work anywhere, but especially in marginal sections of New Haven.

Building several homes in close proximity, often in a row, maximizes the bang for the buck and the volunteer hours. It creates a foothold of pride and safety in places where fear

What a difference!



18 Shepard St.: Habitat transformed this New Haven property, with construction finished in September 2008.



and uncertainty prevented a community from coming together.

The nimbleness of the organization has allowed responses to other opportunities. A historic house in Fair Haven was renovated, two homes were built in Wallingford, a home was just finished in Hamden and a historic house in Hamden may become a Habitat home as well.

Not every undertaking is a fairy tale of success. The condominium model was tried, and failed. Land was bought in a neighborhood blighted by a nightclub and ultimately could not be built upon. Despite a rigorous training program, a small percentage of Habitat families cannot manage the complexities of homeownership.

But for 25 years, Habitat New Haven has brought together urban and suburban residents, public and private institutions, tiny donations from schoolchildren and hundreds of thousands of hours of hard work, good humor and faith that there are some things worth doing — a dynamic that has permanently changed the lives of about 80 families.

Happy 25th birthday, Habitat!

Duo Dickinson, an architect, is on the board of directors of Habitat for Humanity of Greater New Haven. Write to him at 94 Bradley Road, Madison 06443. Email: duo.dickinson@snet.net.