

## Habitat for Humanity of Chester County celebrates 20 years

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By: Danielle Lynch, Staff Writer

CALN — While gathered around a large conference table on Thursday, longtime volunteers and officials from Habitat for Humanity of Chester County reminisced about the way the organization has grown and helped people during the past 20 years.



Nearly two decades ago, Habitat for Humanity of Chester County built its first home in South Coatesville. And though 20 years have passed, the mission of the organization remains the same: building and renovating homes for families in need.

The volunteers, staff members and board members are comprised of a diverse crowd from all areas of the county. The volunteer base has grown from about 70 to 2,500 members.

Kitty Knox of West Chester, a former board member and volunteer, was a member of the group that built the first home.

"The most remarkable thing about that day was the homeowner was there," said Knox. "She was so enthusiastic and cheerful. She constantly expressed her appreciation."

At the end of that day, the volunteers were worn out but felt fulfilled, Knox said. The key, she said, was helping others help themselves.

Charlie Fetterhoff of Honey Brook, a longtime volunteer, recalled how the organization used to hold meetings in the basement of a church in Coatesville. Fetterhoff got involved with the organization after listening to a speech given by Millard Fuller.

Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity International, died at age 74 in February. The Chester County affiliate is one of 2,300 affiliates worldwide.

"You couldn't help but listen to (Fuller) and get all fired up," Knox said.

Knox also recalled the way the organization used to hold meetings in restaurants and churches.

"We discovered that food was a motivator for volunteers," said Burt Rottenberger of Kennett Square, a volunteer and former board member.

Rottenberger said those who are unable to participate in building the homes help out by making food for volunteers. Children also make gifts for homeowners during Sunday school, he said.

Volunteering with Habitat is an "opportunity to give back," said Christopher Pippett, president of the organization's board of directors. "And especially when the homeowners are involved you get to talk to them. It's a really rewarding experience."

In addition, the volunteers learn skills. "You can learn as much as you want," said Pippett of Glenmoore.

During a trip to help out Hurricane Katrina victims in Shreveport, La., Pippett said, he learned how to install a roof and hardwood floors.

Another rewarding experience was a project that included solely women volunteers, said Knox. The first project, known as a "women's build," took place in 2004 on Merchant Street in Coatesville.

Phoenixville resident Art Munson, another former board member and volunteer, said being involved in this organization allows people to have a hands-on experience. "A good share of the people ... push paper all week, and this gives them a chance to see what they are doing," he said.

Habitat administrative offices were relocated into a renovated warehouse space in the HomeStore in Caln. The HomeStore, which is managed by Tom Brophy, sells used furniture and other household items that have been donated by individuals, businesses, churches and schools. The money made at the store is then given to Habitat for building projects.

Volunteers and organization officials said participation in Habitat projects is an interest to all age groups. "It's captivating for all ages," said Rottenberger, adding that his grandson is looking forward to volunteering for the organization.

The county's Habitat for Humanity chapter began operating in 1986 as a unit of the Greater Philadelphia Area Habitat for Humanity then became a separate affiliate in 1989 shortly after the construction of the first home in South Coatesville.

John McClintick of Berwyn was a member of Greater Philadelphia Area Habitat of Humanity branch, which originally included three separate chapters: Chester County,

Northern Philadelphia and Western Philadelphia. "The common wisdom was the three chapters could do better on their own," McClintock said.

McClintock, similar to some other volunteers, met his spouse through his work with the organization. "Habitat has been really good to me," he said.

Looking toward the future, the organization hopes to be around at least another 20 years, Pippett said. To date, the local chapter has built and refurbished 107 homes in municipalities such as Coatesville, Phoenixville, West Chester and Downingtown. The organization is looking to expand its service area into southern Chester County, Pippett said.

"We have a good system of volunteers," said Pippett. "Now we're just looking for property to build the houses on. It's a Catch 22 because right now is a good time to buy property but it's a bad time to raise money."

Volunteers said the homes they have built over the years have brought positive changes to neighborhoods.

"It's not just building a house, it's building a neighborhood," said Rottenberger.

In addition to building homes in Shreveport, La., the local branch has connections with other countries including Honduras, Guatemala and Ghana.

"It's not just Habitat of Humanity of Chester County," said Rottenberger. "You're working all around the world."