BRIEF HISTORY/OVERVIEW
GREATER PLAINFIELD HABITAT FOR HUMANITY
1989 to 2007

THE VERY BEGINNING – HFH INTERNATIONAL

Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI) was founded in 1976 by Millard and Linda Fuller in Americus, Georgia. Fuller, a lawyer and millionaire by his 29th birthday, was "married to his business," as Linda said, and his health was beginning to suffer. Faced with a crisis in the marriage, the couple took some time to work out the problems and decided to change goals, divesting themselves of all but the basic family needs.

They went to Koinonia Farm, an integrated Christian community in poor, rural, South Georgia, co-founded by Dr. Clarence Jordan (scholar and farmer) who was working at practical solutions to the problems of substandard housing. The Biblical admonition of Exodus 22:25 provided what was to become the basis of the Habitat ministry: "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender: charge him *no* interest." At Koinonia, the Fullers helped build homes for people who were living in ramshackle houses.

In 1973, they moved the whole family to Zaire, in Central Africa, to see if the Koinonia idea would work in a developing nation. After three years, collecting building experiences in Zaire, they raised some seed money and, inspired by Dr. Jordan, started Fund for Humanity in 1976, which eventually became Habitat for Humanity. The goal of HFHI would be to build in the U.S., as well as using tithe monies to build wherever there was poverty housing in the world.

BEGINNING IN PLAINFIELD - GPHFH

Part of the impetus for organizing the Greater Plainfield HFH came when a contingent of volunteers from the International organization (HFHI) visited the Plainfield area in 1988. Some 30,000 volunteers from many states trekked from Maine to Georgia to call attention to the need for affordable housing.

Along the march route, 120 houses were built by volunteers in various communities. In Atlanta, former President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter led work crews that built or renovated homes there. President and Mrs. Carter have been leading work crews for large building projects every year since then all over the country, and even locations worldwide.

Before the marchers reached Plainfield, one of Millard Fuller's assistants called Crescent Avenue Presbyterian Church (CAPC), asking for the use of the church as a stopover. The group was supposed to arrive on a day in August when the church would not be open, and Pastor Bill Harvey and other staff people would not be available to assist the marchers during their visit.

The Assistant Custodian, Dominic Agrista, knew about Habitat for Humanity from a Reader's Digest story and, remembering how impressed he was with Millard Fuller's story, he offered to change his plans, saying "I will let them in and be their host. Don't worry, Reverend; I will take good care of them."

Arrangements were made for the marchers to sleep on the floor of the Fellowship Hall, and announcements went out to the community that Millard Fuller would speak in the sanctuary. It is not known how the group was fed but Dominic looked after as many details as he could and contributed money to help with the group's expenses.

Soon after the International march, three couples from Mountainside and Watchung, who had been supporting HFHI, called meetings to see how much support there was for the organization of an affiliate in the Plainfield area. The meetings, held at CAPC, were moderated by The Rev. Barbara Aspinall and, among the attendees were representatives from many churches in the area, as well as from other building organizations like Friends of the Carpenter, Ark (a project of Temple Emanu-El in Westfield and St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Plainfield), and Faith, Bricks & Mortar.

After several meetings, the three couples were convinced that there was support for another organization and decided that the HFHI family selection policy was more to their liking than the lottery-based policy of the other groups. They realized that it would mean that they would

not be able to seek government funds if they chose to proceed with the organization of an affiliate.

With this decision made, Peg and Don Peterson, Ruth and Peter Metz, and Ann and Charley Brackbill headed the work to obtain incorporation and non-profit status, as well as approval from HFHI. Officers were elected, and trustees were named from the group of interested persons who came to the open organizational meetings. It took more than a year to organize and complete the necessary paperwork, while also beginning the work of raising funds and finding suitable property.

On May 7, 1989, a kick-off buffet luncheon (donated by Leon's Deli) was held at Crescent Ave. Presbyterian Church, to publicize the effort to build affordable housing and to raise funds. The frame of a house (large enough to walk through) was designed by Fred Wilhelms, and assembled in the Fellowship Hall, as the focal point of the event.

By January, 1989, Greater Plainfield HFH was established as a 501 © (3) corporation, through the donated legal services of McCarter & English of Newark, N. J. Work on affiliation with HFHI continued through 1989 until our official acceptance on March 17, 1990.

Most of the early meetings were held at Crescent Avenue Presbyterian Church, but other churches also permitted meetings in their buildings. Churches helped in other ways as well. The Jan. 15, 1990 minutes state that Crescent Ave. Pres. Church (CAPC) had agreed to handle finances for an interim period, with signators being designated GPHFH officers and the CAPC treasurer.

At first, the office was in the Peterson home in Watchung, but later the First-Park Baptist Church of Plainfield graciously donated space, which proved adequate for many years. In early 2001, the church, deciding that the space was needed for their own use, asked GPHFH to look for another space, and the search was on for a new location.

THE NEW OFFICE STORY

"Divine intervention led us to the corner of Park Avenue and Randolph Road," states Jane Sapienza, GPHFH President at the time. The building had suffered from many years of neglect but its location was perfect, affording us a centralized visibility in the area. The property was purchased on May 10, 2001, and a guiding committee (Jim Finne, Al Yoshimura,

Maggie Savoca, and Ann Brackbill) began the work of planning the renovation and soliciting funding and donations of building materials and services.

Architectural services, generously donated by Siegel Associates of Chatham, N. J., provided a plan for a new office interior, and preserved a neat and modest exterior in keeping with the neighborhood. First floor design would accommodate GPHFH office needs for work space, equipment, storage, and meeting space, as well as a small rest room and kitchenette area. Second floor design would accommodate extra rooms for workshops and training sessions but could also be appropriate for leasing.

A grant from Hyde & Watson Foundation helped to purchase most of our building materials. Donations that were coordinated by Home Depot's Regional Office, provided some of the more expensive items such as cabinets, countertops, plumbing fixtures and tile. Wallwork Group of South Plainfield donated the heating and air conditioning equipment, and Silverline, Inc. of Edison donated new windows.

The renovation was a total rehabilitation of the building. A sturdy and loyal group of regular volunteers, from churches (mainly Fanwood Presbyterian) and corporations, provided the labor. Serving as Project Manager, James Finne coordinated the use of the donated materials and the volunteer labor, with Al Yoshimura assisting. Maggie Savoca was fundraiser and seeker of donated materials and services.

Although the development of resources and the completion of the renovation was accomplished without affecting the affiliate's normal construction of housing for low-income families, the three supervisors of the regular construction activities provided support and pitched in to help with the office project. These three dedicated supervisors: Marvin Chasek (in his 16th year of volunteer service and active until 2010), Cliff Bekkedahl and Joe Barrett (both now retired from GPHFH), led more than 100 volunteers, to build two or three homes per year for families in need, over a period of over ten years.

HOW WE WORKED

Before 2010, when we hired an Executive Director, our management was by a Board of Trustees and four officers, who had complete authority over, and responsibility, for all business transactions and policy, as outlined in our Certificate of Incorporation and Bylaws. Two longtime volunteers were awarded the status of Trustee Emeritus: Peg Peterson and Bart Barre.

Board work was carried out by nine committees: Construction, Family Selection and Support, Resource Development, Property Acquisition, Faith Relations, Volunteer Coordination, Public Relations, Lunch Program, and Special Events.

For most of our history, we had no paid staff, but in 2004 a part-time Office Manager was hired. Most labor was volunteered but, when necessary, we did contract for certain specialized services such as roofing, plumbing, electrical work, use of back hoe and the like. In many instances, even these services were donated, especially legal services which we received, without cost to us since we began, from Attorney Charles Whelan of New Brunswick, N.J. Overhead and administrative costs were kept at a minimum, so that almost 90% of donated funds were used for building homes.

We solicited funds and grants from foundations as well as from local and national businesses, churches, organizations, and individuals. No government funds were sought except for purchase of property (in some cases) and road building. A committee of volunteers located suitable properties and bought discounted construction materials wherever possible. With volunteer labor, including the "sweat equity" from Habitat families, we built or rehabilitated houses, with attention to the style of buildings in the neighborhood.

Mortgage payments received from Habitat families were recycled into the building of additional houses. We also raised funds with our own events and events planned by others. We customarily tithed 10% of unrestricted contributions to HFH International for the construction of houses in other countries. Since houses in developing countries are considerably less expensive than they are here, we expect that our tithe built many more houses outside the U.S.A. than the number we were building locally.

Habitat houses were sold to low-income families who were selected after an interview process. Interested families first filled out initial questionnaires,

and then invited to an applicant's meeting, where they received applications. The Family Selection Committee members met with individual families to discuss their housing needs, their work and credit records, and their willingness to work with our construction volunteers on the houses built. After the family was selected and approved by the Board of Trustees, they contributed 500 hours of sweat equity (250 hours for single-parent families).

In the years covering this early history of the organization, we were completing an average of two houses per year. In some cases, the waiting time for a family to move into their Habitat house was as much as two or three years. One of the goals for our affiliate was to increase community involvement so that we could build more houses in a year's time.

The houses were (and still are) sold at no profit, with minimal closing fees. GPHFH mortgages are interest-free, long-term mortgages, with one significant restriction affecting re-sale of the house to gain a quick profit. Since HFH houses are worth more on the open market than the HFH sale price, families who wished to leave the house before the first ten years of the mortgage, must offer the house to GPHFH at the original purchase price, plus or minus certain minor changes that may have been made in the structure or condition of the house.

After ten years, the family would probably be able to make a profit, pay off our mortgage, and move to a bigger house, or another location, and we would be happy for their success.

The hope of the early volunteers was that GPHFH would continue to grow, so that even more working families could have a decent home of their own.

Compiled by Ann Brackbill, Co-founder
Secretary, GPHFH
2007 and 2019