

## **Generous Spirit Could Have Broad Impact**

By Robert Knebel

Bridgeport has been the epicenter for numerous positive events this summer, from a highly successful music festival to streets filled with major motion picture actors. Even the producers of two highly popular reality television programs chose the city for their first forays into Connecticut. It seems the world beyond eastern Fairfield County is discovering what those of us who have lived and worked in the region have known for years —our community and its people have much to offer.

In particular, consider the experience of those producing “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.” In just seven days, the badly damaged East Side home of Gloria Brown and her three children was razed and an elegant Victorian home was built in its place. Over 500 volunteers worked in shifts around the clock, often in searing heat and humidity. A Danbury architect designed the home, and a Fairfield construction firm handled project management and professional construction elements. Caterers, restaurateurs, logistic managers, and others provided support services. All of them donated their services and products. This was truly a demonstration of a community’s generosity for a deserving family.

This event will change the Brown family’s lives in yet-to-be-imagined ways. It may even change the block on which the Browns live as adjacent property owners become inspired to improve their properties. The show’s producers and network will earn a profit and viewers from the segment will be moved by the spirit of the Brown family.

But the enthusiasm and generous spirit that built the Brown home could have a much greater impact in this city. Like the Browns, thousands of working families deserve a better home. They include Wes, a widower with six young children who shared his late wife’s dream of owning a home; Elizabeth, a single mother of four children living in a two-bedroom condominium with her parents; and Geraldo and Nellie, whose children had to sleep in the bathtub at night to be safe from stray bullets. They want their children to have a stable, clean, safe place to live and play. Many want to own a home, but even two incomes do not qualify them for traditional mortgages.

Over 20 years ago, another group of enthusiastic, community-minded volunteers found a way to help meet the need for affordable home ownership in the region by establishing an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity International. In its 22-year history, Habitat for Humanity of Coastal Fairfield County has enabled more than 135 families to buy their own homes, including each of the families mentioned above. These homes are built largely by volunteers and with private donations of goods, services, and cash. To qualify, each family must contribute 500 hours of “sweat equity” volunteering to build Habitat homes. In return, they purchase their homes with no-interest, no-profit mortgages.

Nearly every day, volunteers are working on at least one home in Bridgeport for Habitat for Humanity. Ten homes are currently under construction in the city; twenty families await groundbreaking for their homes; and many more have filed applications to be accepted to the program. We have committed to build 65 more homes by 2010.

Habitat for Humanity of Coastal Fairfield County doesn’t work at the “extreme” pace of “Extreme Makeovers,” but our 20-year track record has made us the leading provider of affordable housing for purchase in the city. Every house we build strengthens a neighborhood, a family, and the community. The enthusiasm and generosity displayed this summer is too precious a resource to be allowed to fade away. We encourage those who volunteered on or donated to the Brown home, those who regret missing the opportunity to help, and those who are looking for a way to make a difference in their community to join us in building more homes for deserving families.

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**By the Numbers**

	Extreme Make Over	Habitat for Humanity of Coastal Fairfield County
# of homes built or refurbished	1	126
# of homes currently under construction in Bpt.	0	10
# of homes proposed in next year	0	20
# of Families Served	1	131
# of People Served	4	515
# of Families waiting for a home	0	20
# of People to be served	0	80