Celebrating 30 years of building success has taken shape in so many ways… engaging communities; developing leadership; collaboration with businesses, municipalities, and volunteers, and most importantly, supporting our families in achieving a piece of the American Dream. With our 81st home almost completed, and 11 homes rehabbed – Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity tells an inspiring 30 year story of transformation.

Dear Neighbors, Friends, and Supporters:

It has been 30 years since Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity’s visionary founders, Margot and George Bixby, formed the organization to assist families achieve the dream of homeownership. Their compassion and commitment to a cause that has since served over 80 families has been exemplary. Over the years they unselfishly shared their time, talent, and treasure to build Merrimack Valley Habitat into the successful non-profit it is today.

In this issue of Views from the Porch, you will read about why we are truly celebrating 30 years of success. You will learn more about the founding of MVHH and its subsequent historical milestones, including its most recent accomplishment – the completion of the Bixby Building at 100 Parker Street. One of the great success stories of Habitat Families is when they are able to pay off their mortgages, so you will learn what that has meant to them. The newsletter also highlights the recent success of our 6th Annual Brickman Triathlon as well as the generous funding we have received for our recently begun Veterans Build project on Phillips Street in Lawrence.
The Habitat model is a testament to community extending a hand-up to those often desperate for stability and a new start.

In 2015 alone, building and ReStore volunteers put in over 18,000 hours of volunteer time – enabling us to channel necessary funding towards our 10 homes at the Bixby Building (100 Parker Street) and the launching of two new build sites: Eastern Bank, Bank of America, and City of Lawrence HOME Funds, along with labor from Greater Lawrence Technical School, have us well on our way at 40 – 50 Margin Street. And our first ever Cummings Foundation $100K for 100 grant is dedicated to our Veterans Build at 124-126 Phillips Street, which has broken ground. With our volunteer hourly savings in FY’15 measured at over $500,000, our brand new three bedroom homes brings the cost to an average $125,000 with a zero percent mortgage for 25-30 years. All the cost to an average $125,000 with a brand new three bedroom homes brings.

But how did we get here?

Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity, like the 1,400 affiliates across the country, and 70 national organizations around the world working to eliminate poverty housing, started with a few compassionate citizens driven by the love and welfare of the region’s communities and, in the case of our affiliate, by the love of an immediate family member facing the hardship of finding decent affordable housing.

After social unrest in Lawrence in the early ’80s, resulting in riots in the Lower Tower Hill and Railroad Street areas, the Greater Lawrence Ecumenical Area Ministry, led by Reverend James Keller, formed to address challenges of poverty for Lawrence residents. Reverend Keller, having served in the South Bronx, was familiar with the impacts of racial divide in immigrant communities. As upheaval was impacting Greater Lawrence – Margot Bixby, and her husband George, who were active members of Christ Church Andover, were facing their daughter’s move to Lawrence, and what seemed like insurmountable housing hurdles on a minimum wage salary. Dismayed by her daughter’s options, Margot had received the church diocesan newspaper with an article about representatives from Habitat for Humanity coming to Lawrence. It caught her eye. She attended an open meeting that expanded the process of establishing an affiliate. James Keller and others from area churches were there. Margot volunteered to set up a steering committee, and Reverend Keller set up contacts with 50 congregations to discuss the model of homeownership through the progressive Habitat model of sweat equity instead of a down-payment required by the families. The lead builders were Andover Equity Builders of Andover, MA, Blackdog Builders of Salem, NH and Thomas O. Childs Designer/Builder Andover, MA completing 30C Melrose Street for the Vejel family in six days.

In 2006, Merrimack Valley Habitat participated in its first national Builders Blitz Week, with 130 Habitat affiliates across the United States. Our lead builders were Andover Equity Builders of Andover, MA, Blackdog Builders of Salem, NH and Thomas O. Childs Designer/Builder Andover, MA completing 30C Melrose Street for the Vejel family in six days.

January 21, 2008 was a day of heartache for the City of Lawrence and the affiliate. In the early morning hours a seven alarm fire engulfed a city block in South Lawrence destroying over 70 properties, or acquired a property from a municipality at a fraction of the market cost. From 2005 through mid-2008, property became scarcer and exponentially more expensive. Yet, we knew that to continue our mission, we needed to build more homes.

When the iconic, century old St. Patrick’s Convent came on the market in early 2008, MVHH seized the opportunity to take on what became the affiliate’s largest and most complex build. Now seven years later, we prepare to move 10 families into 100 Parker Street, aptly named the Bixby Building. With this build MVHH has maintained a piece of history for the City of Lawrence, with much of the convent facade and the main stairwell inside remaining intact. Federal and State energy (EPA) agencies have

Transforming lives and communities

Over our 30 years, Merrimack Valley Habitat has focused on rebuilding communities in 20 Lawrence neighborhoods, including areas of Lower Tower Hill where the original unrest took place in the ’80s. We built our first home at the intersection of Champlain and Milville Avenues, on a lot made available by the City of Lawrence for $1. We have been fortunate to have the ongoing support of hundreds of businesses and thousands of individuals including the sponsorship of homeowners by the New Balance Foundation, The Eagle Tribune, The Financial Advisors of Andover, Marshalls, MIT, “The House that Faith Built”, funded and built by a consortium of local area churches, and a Women Build home in Haverhill.

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Over 200 families were displaced. Habitat families were on the verge of moving in with their belongings already packed. It was a devastation felt across the organization. Yet, we committed to rebuilding immediately. Along with the support of the City of Lawrence, under the leadership of Mayor Michael Sullivan, and the outpouring of help from donors and volunteers, all seven units of the Market Common project were completed and occupied.

Throughout the early years of the affiliate we were often blessed with donated properties, or acquired a property from a municipality at a fraction of the market cost. From 2005 through mid-2008, property became scarcer and exponentially more expensive. Yet, we knew that to continue our mission, we needed to build more homes.

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lauded Merrimack Valley Habitat for our environmentally conscious building practices on this particular project that will pass along cost savings to these families.

Recent Builders Blitz projects

In between all the work at 100 Parker Street we’ve held two additional Builders Blitz projects, overseen by Board members Stephen and Susan Howell of Howell Custom Building Group. With each site – 2012 at Market Common and then in 2014, in Lower Tower Hill on Acton Street, we followed our traditional two family condominium format – moving four families into brand new homes in just six days of building. Special guest Steve Thomas,
Six Years of Tri-ing Together

Gary Morrell, CEO of the Merrimack Valley YMCA (left) and Gerry Pouliot, Race Director and former MVHH Board member (right), present Mayor Daniel Rivera with the 2015 Brickman Leadership Award for his commitment to health and excellence in Lawrence.

Carter Work Projects and 30 Years of World Habitat Days

Since 1984 former President Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, have given a week of their time each year to help Habitat for Humanity improve and build homes. On May 16th, MVHH supporter George Fischer and his wife Carol of Boxford had the opportunity, with other supporters, to meet the Carters in Plains, GA. George mentioned, “For a 90 year old man, Carter is quite spry – very mobile and active even still. We were very fortunate to have the experience.”

Paid in Full!

For Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity supporters—our many generous donors and volunteers—helping to provide families with decent, affordable housing is truly gratifying. Without that commitment, MVHH would not have been able to build 71 homes, rehab 11 others, and position 82 Merrimack Valley families for economic success through affordable home ownership. Over the past 30 years, 10 Habitat Families have paid off their mortgages—an economic success story of monumental proportions for them and for Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity.

In a region where too many renters spend an above average portion of their income on housing, having the opportunity to own a home with an affordable payment is immense. Through a friend, Sara Saldana learned about MVHH. She subsequently attended an informational meeting at the Lawrence Public Library and filled out an application. At the time, she was “working part-time and did not have enough money to pay a mortgage in the regular market,” so the Habitat program “helped me economically and to be more positive in life and create stability.” Sara and her seven children became a Habitat Family in 1990, held a 20 year note, and happily paid it off in 2010. She adds, “I feel so happy, it is like when you win the lottery!”

ReStore Continues its Growth

For almost five years, the ReStore has contributed to the success of the Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity in building homes and building hope with sales increases of 500%.

We are unique and offer distinctive products and services. Strong customer service, coupled with daily arrivals of new and gently used merchandise, sets Habitat ReStore apart from other resale businesses. With help from donors, shoppers, and volunteers, Habitat ReStore supports Habitat for Humanity’s vision of a world where everyone has a decent place to live.

By accepting donations, ReStore has diverted 600 tons of reusable materials from local landfills; its focus on environmental sustainability is an added benefit to the public. The ReStore applies for increase donations and subsequent sales growth in order to continue to be part of the 30 years of success in building homes and hope in the Merrimack Valley.
You make the life-changing work we do possible. The following gifts received between July 1, 2014 and June 30, 2015. We sincerely thank everyone who contributed and listed here for their generosity and commitment to helping to deserving families.
The Cummings Foundation, through its prestigious "$100K for 100" initiative, provides an opportunity for the Cummings Foundation’s assets now exceed $1 billion, making it one of the largest Foundations in New England.

Veterans Build Sparks Enthusiasm

During the past 30 years, Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity has built a track record of success largely through the partnerships it has developed. From the start, faith communities played—and continue to play—a critical role in driving our homes while military veterans have served as neighbors and volunteers.

Last year, MVHH began the development of its Veterans Build Program and, in turn, has strengthened its partnership with the Veterans Northeast Outreach Center (VNOC) in an effort to help U.S. Military Veteran families along the path to home ownership. There remains an acute need for affordable housing in the Merrimack Valley, and for veterans in particular. Through our partnership with the VNOC and its Executive Director, John Rakia, we have acquired our Veteran Build property at 124-126 Phillips Street.

Stevens Venables, president and CEO of MVHH said, "In our first Veterans Build program, called "Buddy Build," our goal was to engage our near 1800 volunteer auditors to help veteran families achieve homeownership. As our organization grows, we plan to increase our volunteer base and expand our reach to veterans in need."
During the past year Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity has had a number of transitions. I would also like to share with you. Joining our administrative office is Bob Roetger, Director of Development and Chellenne Valdez, Office Manager. This year Habitat is hosting a Merrimack College Fellow, Kristie Nardini, who will assist with development and marketing projects. At the ReStore, Habitat welcomed Michael Daneau and Margot Loomis to its staff.

I am very pleased to share with you that Marty Mason and Michael Tarshi have joined the Board of Directors, as has Stuart Johnson, who will Chair our Development Committee. A number of other Board members recently concluded their service, which included countless hours of committee work and volunteering. We would not be positioned to continue our next 30 years of success without the commitments of outgoing members Mary Honan, Ken Lepage, Doug Mercurio, Helaine Palmer, Gerry Pouliot, and Lisa Schwartz. I thank them all!

I want to conclude by thanking all of you – our neighbors, friends, and supporters – for your commitment to making our Merrimack Valley affiliate so successful. It is not a cliché to say that we could not have done it without your donations and many volunteer hours as we continue to help deserving families in our region by providing them with “a hand up, not a hand out.”

Sincerely,
Dick Sumberg
President, Board of Directors

30 Ways to Give

1. Pledge to support the organization with recurring monthly donations
2. Donate household items to the ReStore
3. Volunteer your professional services
4. Sign up for one or 30 days volunteering to build or at our ReStore
5. Shop for your home goods at the ReStore and get great deals!
6. Make a meal for our hardworking volunteers
7. Attend our annual Building Dreams Gala
8. Adopt a Unit for one of our building projects
9. Share us on social media – Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn
10. Partner with a Merrimack Valley Habitat family for a housewarming
11. Help your company establish a matching gift program
12. Consider making a bequest or other planned gift to Habitat
13. Help plan our Gala!
14. Donate land for a new MVHH home
15. Join one of our many committees
16. Donate auction items for our gala
17. Participate in our annual Brickman Triathlon
18. Support us by making a special donation on Giving Tuesday
19. Get your faith community involved by inviting a group to build with us
20. Organize a group of colleagues for a team Building Day
21. Write about your great experience with us!
22. Collect spare change in a cardboard Habitat House bank
23. Start a Campus Chapter at your college or high school
24. Join one of the many Women Build Days
25. Purchase a memorial gift in honor of a loved one
26. Donate your car
27. Celebrate a milestone and ask for donations in lieu of gifts
28. Collect tools and toolboxes to donate to our next build site
29. Sponsor a Nickels for Nails fundraiser
30. Shop on Amazon Smile for Merrimack Valley Habitat

Read more about our history and ways of giving at www.merrimackvalleyhabitat.org