

# FORUM

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## Mothers & More “Connects” With Habitat for Humanity’s Women Build Program

by *kathy a. johnson*

*The 2007 Mother’s Day Campaign “Making connections. Making a difference.” focuses on broadening chapters’ community outreach activities. Mothers & More plans to make connections with Habitat for Humanity’s Women Build program—by forming a partnership we hope will make a difference in the lives of both Women Build’s homeowner moms and our members.*

### **What is Women Build?**

Habitat for Humanity’s Women Build program formally began in 1998. According to their website ([www.habitat.org/wb](http://www.habitat.org/wb)), “Women Build brings together women from all walks of life to address in a concrete way the housing crisis facing millions of women and children across the globe.” Women Build crews have built more than 800 Habitat for Humanity homes in 14 countries.

Women Build, and Habitat for Humanity as a whole, aims to eradicate poverty housing, building affordable, decent homes for people in need.

“We are dealing with people who are working really hard to have a stable life,” says Linda Sultan, director of Women Build. “In order to qualify for a Habitat home, they must demonstrate a need for housing (currently be living in substandard housing or overcrowded conditions); they must agree to partner with



*Laying the upstairs floor boards at the Greater Green Bay Habitat for Humanity 2005 Women Build.*

Habitat through ‘sweat equity’ by working on their own house as well as other Habitat houses; and they must be able to pay a no-profit loan typically equal to no more than 30% of their income. Most Habitat families earn 50% or less than the median income for their particular area.”

In addition to these requirements, Habitat families must also take a course in home improvement and maintenance.

### **Why women crews?**

In the 1990s, Habitat for Humanity had begun to examine calls from women who wanted to volunteer on a build, but were finding it difficult to insert themselves into a project run by men with construction or carpentry experience. “They found themselves handing out nails and cleaning up the work site when they really wanted to do the building,” Sultan comments.

Women Build seized the opportunity to empower women volunteers by training them in basic building skills. Three years ago, Lowe’s became the national underwriter for Women Build. As part of their commitment, the company provides free training clinics nationwide. These include: how to safely use hand and power tools, framing of walls and roofs, installing insulation and exterior

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siding, and interior finishes. Today, more than 30,000 women have participated in Women Build projects.

Women Build does not exclude men, but strives to make building sites a comfortable environment for women. A typical Women Build site does have predominantly or all women participants, but some specialists on site may be men when women are not available. If there is a male homeowner, he works alongside the volunteers as usual.

What makes this program interesting to Mothers & More is that, according to Habitat for Humanity statistics, 60% to 80% of Habitat homeowners are single moms.

“There’s a mother’s story under the surface here, but people are not looking at it,” suggests Mothers & More Executive Director Joanne Brundage. “All the statistics are about kids and how they benefit when their parent(s) are homeowners. We wonder if the story might be that moms suffer unique economic penalties while trying to put a roof over their kids’ heads. Both Mothers & More and Women Build are interested to see if we can find any data on mothers’ economic realities and how they impact home ownership,” she adds.

## How did the partnership come about?

A couple of Mothers & More chapters had already volunteered at Women Build projects as part of their own community outreach activities, and a few more had explored it. (See sidebar on page 9 for one chapter’s story.) They enjoyed the experience so much that they approached Mothers & More leadership suggesting that the organization should expand its participation and involve more chapters.

At the same time, Brundage says, “Women Build was trying to determine which national women’s organizations might be out there who could supply volunteers on a fairly regular basis. Since we were redefining community outreach, this project seemed to match up so well. We want to walk our talk about mothers’ issues.”

After Mothers & More contacted her, “Linda Sultan sent us a list of Women Build projects for May,” Brundage says. “We compared their list to our chapter list, found 23 chapters that may be reasonably close to nine of their Women Build sites,

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“Women who volunteer on Women Build sites don’t need construction experience.”

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*Right: Alison Norris nails a protective barrier on the garage.*

*Below: Kara Kane prepares to use the circular saw.*



and contacted the leaders of those chapters to see if they might be interested in pulling together a construction team.”

The first connection had been made.

## What can we do?

While at press time, the exact details of the partnership had not yet been finalized. “Both organizations are very open and excited about working together,” Brundage says. “Our goal is to get at least two to five chapters involved in Women Build projects this spring and do joint PR with Women Build on the economic risks many mothers face in trying to care for their families, earn a living and keep a roof over everyone’s heads.”

Ultimately, perhaps Women Build projects could become a chapter’s regular outreach activity. (Mothers & More will not be fundraising for Women Build; we will only be providing volunteers.) For Mothers & More, the hope is also that working on a Women Build project will strengthen connections between Mothers & More members, create connections between our members and other mothers in their community, and help all involved to feel empowered. “Volunteers say they get much more out of it than they put in,” says Sultan.

Women Build hopes to connect with a new source of volunteers. Sultan says, “We have been looking for national organizations of women interested in volunteering so that we can increase our capacity to build housing. Far more people apply for homes than we can build for,” she says. “More volunteers equal more houses.”

Women who volunteer on Women Build sites don’t need construction experience. All training and tools are provided.

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## “We want to walk our talk about mothers’ issues.”

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As Sultan says, “If you can kneel and stand up, you can build!” She adds, “You learn so many new skills so fast you cannot imagine! It’s physical work, but we have fun. It’s so energizing!”

Volunteers only do what they’re comfortable with, and “house leaders” are available to give helpful hints and coaching.

Mothers & More hopes members will learn more than how to hang drywall or nail down a floor while working with Women Build. “We also believe that while chapters can educate the public about mothers’ issues, education goes the other way too. We can always be further educated. We’re not missionaries. We’re learning, too,” says Brundage. “We’re grateful for what we can learn from other moms about their lives and how they are different from ours. We can find connections between the issues we face as mothers

and the issues that face mothers who might be in a different situation. In working side by side with a Women Build homeowner, we realize this is not ‘theory’—this is how this mom has suffered economic penalties.

“The issues Mothers & More addresses—cultural, social and economic—are ones that affect all mothers, just perhaps in different ways, depending on a mother’s personal circumstances,” she adds. “Maybe mothers like our members, many of whom have time, energy and access to resources that not all mothers have, can do something about these issues. We want to be working with moms among our membership and outside of our membership. We want to not only talk about these issues but to experience their impact in personal, tangible ways and to act on them,” Brundage continues. “Working with Women Build seems to be a wonderful, accessible way we can do that.”

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*Features Editor Kathy A. Johnson lives in Florida and is unchapered.*

### **For more information see:**

[www.mothersandmore.org](http://www.mothersandmore.org)

[www.habitat.org/wb](http://www.habitat.org/wb)

## “If I Had a Hammer”: Green Bay, WI Chapter 179 Participates in Women Build Project

On September 10, 2005, 28 members of the Green Bay, WI, chapter of Mothers & More volunteered at a Habitat for Humanity’s Women Build project as part of their community outreach. Members volunteered for half day shifts (7:45 a.m. to noon; noon to 4:30 p.m.); two stayed for the entire day. A few individual volunteers not affiliated with Mothers & More, as well as the future homeowner, joined the group, and a local church provided lunch for both shifts. Habitat for Humanity provided professionals to teach volunteers the construction skills they needed—how to measure, cut, hammer and so on.

Members did everything from framing doors and windows, to nailing down floors, to caulking.

Kim Sullivan, who organized the project, says, “I knew of Habitat for Humanity and thought it would be a great hands-on experience for our group to get involved with. I wasn’t aware [of the Women Build program] until a member of my Community Outreach committee brought it up.

“I personally wanted to participate for two reasons,” Sullivan continues. “First, I thought it would be a great way to help a mom in our community. I was excited to actually get to meet the mom and work side-by-side with her; I wanted to learn more about her and her family. Secondly, I wanted to have this bonding experience with my friends and fellow members.”

“The feeling of camaraderie in our group has lasted over a year since we did this,” Vicki Hunt says. “Going through something that’s new and difficult and achieving it really bonded our group. Every time I drive by that house, I feel good about myself and our chapter. It’s a terrific way to give back to the community and bring your chapter together as well!”

“It’s a wonderful experience and gives you such a great sense of well being knowing that you have helped a family in need,” Barb

LeCloux concurs. “I have always been a great fan of Habitat for Humanity but was a little intimidated to volunteer on my own. Habitat also has great volunteers with building experience that were very patient with us and great at explaining what we were doing and how the equipment worked. They also were very willing to let us try out any power tool we were interested in learning about if it was needed on our particular project.”

“I loved using the power tools, really empowering!” Hunt agrees.

Sullivan adds, “The best part for me was a surge of self-confidence and pride in my ability to accomplish the daily work of building a house. I truly felt like yelling from the top of the house, ‘I am woman—hear me roar!’ My husband and kids stopped by during the day to see Mom building a house. My 2½ year old son was impressed—I liked that! Several other husbands and kids arrived on site. One of the moms tells me they go past that house on the way to school and her child always points and says, ‘That’s the house that Mom built!’ It was really a great feeling of doing something good for a mom right here in our community and giving ourselves a little self-esteem boost at the same time. This experience gave me the confidence to volunteer to go to Pass Christian, Mississippi, in June 2006 for a week to help rebuild houses after Hurricane Katrina. It was an Alumni Service Trip coordinated through my alma mater.”

When asked if they would encourage other Mothers & More chapters to participate in a Women Build project, LeCloux says, “It was a very rich and rewarding experience and one that I would recommend to anyone!”

Sullivan responds, “Absolutely! Again, it was a great win-win situation. We gave to the community and to this particular woman and her family, but we also gained a sense of accomplishment, pride and cohesion as a group.”

Green Bay plans to participate in another Women Build project this summer.

*Special thanks to Kim Sullivan of Green Bay, WI Chapter 179 for her assistance in compiling this information and providing the photographs.*