



 COLUMN

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Habitat for Humanity: Looking for a few more hands, hearts, and minds

By Liz DiMarco Weinmann

When Hurricane Irene ravaged large swaths of our region more than 10 years ago, national and local media alike praised Vermonters' courage, hardiness, and community spirit. Even the New York Times ran a justifiably joyful feature, about a group of parents who discovered a half-mile-long path through the forest and ultimately guided 33 elementary and middle school students across Route 4 to the other side of the

mountain. Though the storm had knocked out many families' electricity, the kids all made it to their classrooms on time for the first day of school, thanks to the unshakable determination of their resourceful families.

That kind of Vermont tenacity, born of an unflinching commitment to the wellbeing of friends and neighbors, is in full force among the dedicated volunteers who contribute their talents to the Rutland affiliate of Habitat for Humanity, the global nonprofit housing organization working across the U.S. and in approximately 70 countries.

One of the most enthusiastic of the Rutland Habitat affiliate's volunteers, is local builder Eric Solsaa, who has served as president of the local Habitat board for nearly a decade.

"2022 is going to be a transformational year for us," Solsaa told me in a recent phone interview, as he was finishing up meetings at his office and heading to see a local funder.

Most baby boomers are aware of Habitat for Humanity, because of its association with former President Jimmy Carter, who became a Habitat volunteer after his term ended in 1981. Solsaa is acutely aware that there likely are younger people who never even saw, let alone remember, countless newsclips of Carter as Habitat's most famous ambassador — collaborating with contractors, hoisting a hammer, or brandishing a brick.

That the strife and stress of the past two years have prompted all of us — regardless of age, gender, race, socioeconomic group, or faith — to reassess our purpose and how we spend our time to do good, is a trend not lost on Eric Solsaa. And, he has good reason to feel optimistic: Last February he and Dick Malley, chair of the local resource and development committee for Habitat, led a group that succeeded in landing a grant for \$105,000 — the full amount requested — to boost the overall capacity of the organization for at least the next two years.

Part of the grant will fund the organization's first full time executive director, Rebekah Stephens, one of the most admired nonprofit leaders in the Rutland region. Stephens, the former executive director of the Rutland Community Cupboard, is also the founder of Rutland's Promise, an organization that provides temporary emergency shelter for local families.

The daughter of a retired corrections officer, Stephens said that observing her father's dedication to helping people in the penal system inspired her to do the same. After earning her master's in criminal justice, Stephens first worked as an IRS auditor, earning top grades in her qualifying exam, but her desire to do more direct service was too strong to ignore.

After years of travel, including living in Florida, the New Jersey native became the executive director of the Rutland Community Cupboard three years ago.

"The Cupboard was my ministry," says Stephens, who proudly declares herself a devout Christian. We served all sorts of people, from every social class, including working people, who had to make a choice between feeding their kids or buying gas so they could get to work."

Of her motivation to found Rutland's Promise, she explained, "It happened because of a conversation on continuum of care for our most vulnerable. With that in my background, what I want most to do for Habitat and those we serve is to listen, learn and absorb from the volunteers, and help take them to the next level."

When I asked Eric Solsaa what he most wanted to convey about the organization's accomplishments and what it needs to reach the next level, he too emphasized volunteers.

"Many of them are older and retired, and we're so grateful for them, but we always need more volunteers. Habitat is a place where volunteers of

all ages can really effect visible change. For example, we've built ramps for the homes of people who couldn't get out of hospital beds, so that they could return safely to their homes.

"But our building and construction work is only part of what we need," Solsaa said. "A lot of younger people are not familiar with our committees — we need people for finance, resource development, and marketing, for example."

Solsaa expressed his gratitude for local companies that contribute those talents, and more, including G.E. Aviation, Carris Reels, and some of the area's banks and insurance companies. He also expressed hopes that the addition of Stephens will enable Habitat to attract funding from national foundations and major donors.

My admiration for Stephens, Solsaa, Dick Malley, and Habitat volunteers is very personal. Growing up, I watched my father — an Italian immigrant — reconstruct and refurbish from top to bottom both small Philadelphia rowhomes where he and my mother raised three active children over the course of two decades. He and his able-bodied buddies did this work at night — after working all day in stifling garment factories.

Habitat for Humanity is the modern equivalent of that American dream — one that reflects the Vermont spirit national media continue to praise. The local affiliate needs to raise three times what was raised in 2021 by the end of 2023, and Solsaa and Stephens both welcome volunteers in that effort. Whether volunteers contribute with their hands, hearts, or minds, as builders, board members or on committees, they're essential workers, nonetheless.

Habitat for Humanity's Rutland builds are on Wednesdays and Saturdays. To apply for a home with the Rutland affiliate, email rutlandhabitat@gmail.com. For more information visit: habitat.org/us-vt/rutland/hfh-rutland-county-vermont; or call 802-747-7440.

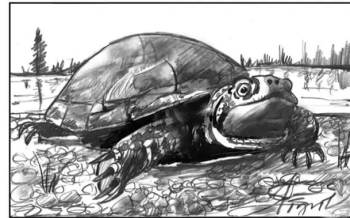
Liz DiMarco Weinmann, MBA, is principal and owner of Liz DiMarco Weinmann Consulting, L3C, based in Rutland, serving charitable and educational institutions.

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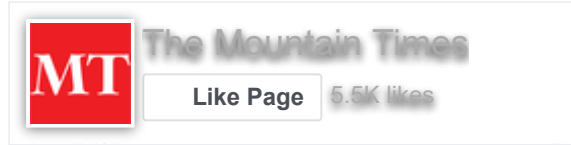
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