

Building Affordable Homes for Hardworking Families

Habitat for Humanity in NYC first began in 1984 with Jimmy Carter's visit to the Lower East Side. Since then, the non-profit has built over 260 homes in all five boroughs. Currently, Habitat is constructing seven multi-family buildings across New York City.

"We build homes for hardworking low-income families living in unaffordable, dangerous, and overcrowded conditions," explains Josh Lockwood, executive director of Habitat NYC.

The statistics are eye opening.

"One in four New York renters pays more than 50% of household income in rent and utilities. The federal "affordable housing" definition is a maximum of 30% of household income. Every night, about 39,000 New Yorkers sleep in homeless shelters. This includes about 8,400 families with more than 16,000 children. An estimated 4,300 homeless adults live on the streets."

Habitat NYC is intent on changing those statistics. A leading advocate for affordable housing, their goal is to ensure that every New Yorker has a decent, affordable home.

The initiative's recent focus is on building and renovating homes in the Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn and the Brownsville, Brooklyn areas-neighborhoods that have high foreclosure rates.

"The demand for what we do are incredibly strong," says Lockwood. "A couple of years ago Habitat - NYC built a 41 condominium complex in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and we received 10,000 applications for those units."

One of the volunteers that worked on that building was Anil Fernando.

Fernando's first experience with Habitat was over 13 years ago. A ninth grader at the time, he participated in a church organized weeklong build in a small New Hampshire town.

"It was a pretty impactful experience," he reflects. "I continued working with them through high school and college, and when I moved to NYC six years ago, I got in touch with Habitat."

The volunteer, who is a managing director at an investment firm, works on Saturdays a couple of times a month. In his spare time, he builds furniture (for fun) and says that all his experience with building has been through Habitat.

Habitat NYC has between 6,000 and 10,000 volunteers from all five boroughs during the year that help out four days a week.

"We primarily work with groups of people, school groups, and corporate groups," says Lockwood.

But it's not just a "come as you go" opportunity. The volunteers sign up three months in advance of their build day. Once you sign up, you receive the date, the location and directions, and all other pertinent information.

Training, safety, and technical support are provided on-site. "All you need to show up in is long pants, shoes with thick soles, and appropriate clothing for the weather, and you're good to go," says Franklin. He explained that the groups of up to five people can expect to construct dry walls, paint, and put up metal studs to form the walls of an apartment.

"It's a good break from the typical experience in New York. It is outdoors. It is much more physically intense than working at an investment firm," he says.

"When I first went to a site years ago, I had an opportunity to build with some of the individuals that were eventually moving into the building. Working with Habitat has made me notice the severity of the issue around affordable housing, especially in New York where the cost of real estate is higher," he maintains.

"Habitat is a good advocate for affordable housing, and they do a great job of trying to inform communities and leaders of what is going on. The organization is more than putting together the structures that people will live in."

For more information, call (212) 991-4000 or visit habitatnyc.org.

— Holly Reich

About Big Town **Big Heart**

Big Town Big Heart is a series of articles showcasing organizations and volunteers who make a difference.



Anil Fernando, a Habitat-NYC volunteer, started volunteering when he was in ninth grade.