

Unity Between Strangers *A Homebuilder's Story*

"IT WAS AN EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE," says Habitat homeowner and volunteer Charlette Henry, "to achieve what one day seemed like an unachievable dream."

It may have seemed impossible; just a few years ago Charlette hadn't even heard of Habitat for Humanity.

Back then, Charlette's family of five was living in a two-bedroom apartment where she maintained an essential-belongings only housekeeping rule. She'd already pared down household extras, but had to ask her kids to get rid of some of their favourite things.

But, while the family lived with limited possessions and space restrictions, Charlette says it was difficult to ask her kids to give away personal items they cherished, and even more difficult to watch as they shipped out aging, but much-loved toys and prized artwork.

This constrained lifestyle changed for Charlette and her family when she overheard two Laundromat patrons talking about a planned inaugural Women Build in Cobourg.

Determination, she says, has always been her strong suit and she went right to work. She immediately dug in to learn more. Without the luxury of a home computer, Charlette looked up Habitat for Humanity listing in the telephone book then met with Cathy Lyons, Executive Director, Northumberland, to begin the application process.

From the get-go, the arduous task of building a home and booking 500 "sweat equity" volunteer hours didn't intimidate Charlette, partly, because she's no stranger to a construction site. A former drywall worker, Charlette met her husband Dwayne Labrosse, then a mason, on the job. Their relationship grew from coffee and lunch breaks to romance.



Upbeat and optimistic by nature, Charlette said she held positive through-out the application process that includes interviews, paperwork, and the compulsory waiting period. Her husband was hopeful, but his confidence in the outcome wavered, but Charlette reminded him that they had the right mix, "We're honest, hardworking, and we meet the criteria."

She looks at her home now and fondly recalls the days she spent surrounded by friends, family, tradespersons, and volunteers – collectively building a home.

Twenty-two friends and close relatives came out to support the build, including two aunts from Muskoka where Charlette was raised. The two women now volunteer at their local ReStore. Family members scratched heart-felt messages on floorboards and tucked away in the backs of closets – well wishes to the boys – Kody (12), Kayne (10), Kiefer (6), and Kashton (2).



It means much to her that her children have their own bedrooms. "The older ones, especially," she reflected, "waited a long time for that."

Her involvement in a Women Build

was rewarding in other ways, too. She liked the idea of sharing her construction expertise with inexperienced workers by helping others learn to use power tools. In fact, Charlette received a personal thank you note from her sons' teachers who praised the patience she demonstrated when sharing building techniques to them.

In the experience, Charlette discovered that building a home together is empowering, for everyone involved.

"The unity between strangers" and the prospect of being "a dream-maker for one day" are exhilarating by-products. The volunteers, she says were motivated, the tradespersons remarkable.

When she and her husband stepped into their home for the first time with their kids, there were plenty of tears. The kids raced immediately to their rooms and Dwayne and Charlette embraced. The boys then raced back and joined their parents.

"We're finally home," Charlette recalls saying to them and the words hung in the air. "This is our home."

It's a long way from three part-time jobs of her past, and the two-bedroom apartment she shared with three kids and her husband, while expecting their fourth child. And for this homeowner, it's the distance between impossibility and reality is not longer immeasurable.

Charlette remains involved in Habitat for Humanity participating in projects not because she feels obligated, but because she understands the instability of renting, the anxiety of believing a dream is beyond reach and the joy of discovering it is not.



This past July, in an on-site ceremony devoted to volunteers, Charlette Henry reflected on her experience and what it meant to her. She looked out at the crowd and explained how they were taking part in quite literally, building a dream.

Spending even one day as an on-site volunteer, Charlette explained, can make a difference for the rest of someone else's life.

– Valerie Bean



Image Courtesy of Charlette Henry and family