

Habitat growing, building mission

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If growing pains are a symptom of success, Grand Island Area Habitat for Humanity is aching.

This year, the Grand Island affiliate will finish its 64th house since it started pounding nails in 1992 as a ministry determined to provide decent, affordable homes for families.

“Yes, we have growing pains all the time. We’ve been building six houses a year,” said Executive Director Dana Jelinek.

While the Grand Island Area Habitat for Humanity started slowly with one house 18 years ago, it has worked itself into putting up a half dozen houses every year.

And it has been done essentially one day a week.

“It’s remarkable what we do, build a house in 14 Saturdays, with volunteers,” Jelinek said.

Planet-wide, Habitat for Humanity has built more than 350,000 houses in 3,000 communities since it began in 1976. Those homes mean 1.75 million people have a safe and affordable roof over their heads.

I wandered across the street to St. Stephen’s Community Center Wednesday afternoon to visit with Jelinek about the aging of Habitat for Humanity. I was curious about whether all these years after the steam of novelty and newness had dissipated if potential volunteers think, “Somebody else will do it.”

Long a mainstay

While Jelinek conceded that getting volunteers is “tough,” she said a number of factors contribute, including a busier world with busier people who protect their shrinking “private” time.

She remains unbowed, however, committed to both the Habitat mission and to finding volunteers.

“We do direct calls to businesses, send e-mails. We’re even trying Facebook,” she said.

Habitat’s database has 5,000 names spread across 3,200 households. Jelinek continues trying to tap into churches, long a mainstay in the Habitat volunteer universe.

Sometimes, it's the timing.

"Most affiliates work some days during the week," Jelinek said. Grand Island Area Habitat for Humanity only works Saturdays. If that's a potential volunteer's only day of the week free from the office or the line and brimming with family responsibilities, showing up early for a build isn't always at the top of someone's list.

Sometimes, it's the mistiming.

"When people who are signed up don't show up, it puts you in a bind."

Still, Jelinek knows finding volunteers is often a matter of asking and matching.

"There are people out there who want to do something meaningful but don't know how to plug in," she said.

Nor is any particular home-building talent necessary.

"The best skill you can have is to see what needs to be done and do it. Doers are great to have around"

Healthy dose

Meanwhile, as Jelinek looks for volunteers, Grand Island Area Habitat for Humanity grows, just recently acquiring the York affiliate, thus bringing to five (Hall, Howard, Hamilton and Merrick the others) the number of counties it covers.

Also available is Habitat's "A Brush With Kindness" program, which helps low-income homeowners with small projects to improve their properties.

While volunteers underpin much of the actual building and populate its board of directors, a key to Habitat's success remains working with families.

"Our Family Support Committee is working with nine families at the moment," Jelinek said.

The Family Support Committee guides and supports families through the Habitat "process" with everything from mortgages and financial management to finding baby-sitting when parents are putting in sweat equity hours. Each family is required to put in 500 hours of sweat equity working on their house.

As, as was so Saturday, a wall was going up, a home was being shaped and a family's life was on its way to changing forever.

Any ministry is bound to have aches and pains as it grows into maturity. What continues to make it successful – as Grand Island's Area Habitat for Humanity shows – is keeping its eyes on its mission.

That and a healthy dose of doers.

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