

When we do God's work, lives are changed. One Homeowner's Story

Habitat for Humanity has affected so many people's lives in so many ways and for such a long time, that I think the full extent of its gravity sometimes doesn't always shine through. This is why I need to share my story on how Habitat for Humanity, as a catalyst, has changed my life directly and indirectly. Last February, I was asked to share my story with others at a legislative luncheon in Denver, Colorado and what I experienced there was a full circle event of what most of us cherish on the change that Habitat can have on peoples lives. My story is not typical, yet the impact that has occurred, I credit Habitat; the organization, the volunteers, the staff and of course...the recipients of the home blessing.

My name is Jeff, inmate number 122995 in the Colorado Department of Corrections. I am currently on Parole for crimes I did under the influence of alcohol and drugs. My substance abuse history and the cascading, residual consequences of that lifestyle have ripped through society for well over two decades. I am a multi-state offender who has left in his wake, countless people who have been negatively affected by my decisions and actions. There have been many attempts at change over the years. Treatment programs, classes, geographic changes and it seems, that as I look back there was a missing element for me. You see, a substance abuser like me is by nature a selfish, self-centered and dishonest person. All the attempts in the past were wholly cerebral and most of us know that real, lasting change must come from the heart. That catalyst was missing. Then suddenly it appeared in a most unlikely place, in prison.

I participated in the Habitat for Humanity's Prison Partnership while an inmate in the Colorado State Penal system. It is a program designed to teach offenders new skills that can be applied upon release. It is a four year apprenticeship with its main focus on providing cabinets for the Habitat homes in Colorado. Inmates participate in the program for different reasons. Prison is not a pretty place and doing, "time" sometimes is just doing that. I have been one of those who have been a part of that "revolving door" we hear of so much. I share this with you because there were two different events that happened while I was a participant there. Two events that paved a way to a new life and chipped the hardened heart of mine to live a life I never imagined.

One day, I was approached by the instructor inquiring about an inmate who had used one of the planers the wrong way and had broken it. He asked me who had done it. I would not give up the other inmates name because a convict doesn't do that. It's part of a code of conduct that in this Environment cannot be betrayed. The instructor then proceeded to ask me again after the

class was over and all the inmates had left and again I kept quiet. He then looked at me and with all seriousness and sincerity said to me " Jeff, you participate well in this program and are active in other programs here at the prison. Why is it so difficult for you to just speak the truth? I am not going to write up anyone, no one is in trouble. This is an educational program that teaches inmates and if someone isn't getting it, I need to know so they can know. My concern for you is that how can you ever expect anything different in your life if you can't live honestly.

Troubled, I went back to my cell and spoke about this with my roommate who also was in the program. He is doing a sentence on a violent crime and he too, agreed with our instructor that this wasn't about playing "cops and robbers," but about something else. It was hard to go back to our instructor later that day and tell him the other inmate's name. My belief system was strong and concrete, but that was the needle that broke the camels' back. Nothing happened that I thought was going to. Open, honest disclosure did not hurt me in the least. Nobody said anything derogatory to me and life went on as normal as it could be in prison.

Some time had passed and one day I asked a question to this same instructor about the possibility of one day being a volunteer on one of the builds and his response was that I could not. I did not like that answer. On one level because someone simply told me "no," but on another level I did not like his response because something else was happening...I began to care about something outside of myself, something that was much larger than me and was made up of a whole bunch of somebodies. Don't forget that I am still a selfish, self-centered and dishonest person, but a desire to be different was forming which brings me to the second pivotal aspect of change in my life.

Every now and again we would receive a letter of thanks from the recipients of the cabinets we made. Usually they would be accompanied with a picture of the family moving into the house. One day while reading the note and looking at the picture with my roommate a perception change happened. There was a woman with her two children standing in the kitchen with the Cabinets we had built for the house behind them. I had to come full circle with a significant piece of my past and he with his. In the dialog that followed we agreed that the way in which we both had lived, left in the wake people like these in the photo. The picture was missing the father. It was missing a person and like all of us in prison it sent a resounding wave to the core of my being that there was another place in this life that we all needed to be...and weren't because of how we lived in the past. I recall thinking of all the people I had left behind and failed to live responsibly for. Family, friends and community, they all have names and they all have thoughts and feelings. All too, had been left behind, hurt in so many ways due to how I chose to live. I recall saying to the other inmate...

"You know there is a dirtbag like one of us behind everyone like these in this picture." There past a moment of pause and his comment was a most motivating word I had ever heard. He said to me, looking straight into my eyes, "We've got to get busy. We have some get back to do." Things seemed to change that day after that moment. There was a renewed sense of purpose there at the cabinet shop that spread amongst a few of us and what we were doing there and who we were doing it for.

Many months passed and it became time for me to progress to community corrections, a halfway house. When I got there I didn't have two quarters to rub together. There was no one to support me or help me with the things that others had around me. I had burned those relations long ago. I took a job as a cook and began my navigation through the next stepping stone to freedom. There were many obstacles I encountered during my stay there. Necessary ones though because it is a difficult task I imagine to manage people like me in places like those whose probability of success is less than twenty-five percent. I had to fight seemingly senseless battles to get to outside support groups. I was denied to participate, in any volunteer programs, because community service was not a part of my sentence. It was difficult for me because there was no continuity to the aspects of my change that participation in the cabinet shop had paved the way for. It was at this time that the unbelievable occurred. As a result of, "doing the next right thing" and "letting go and letting God."

I had the option of moving into an apartment, but after looking at my past I realized that being alone never paid good dividends for me. I chose instead to make a phone call to a sober house that was unknown and dropped out of nowhere as a possibility. Made the phone call and spoke to Santa Joe for the first time. I was accepted and soon made my transition. My experience there can be expressed as nothing less than being catapulted into the fourth dimension. The proverbial, "rubber, hit the road."

After being there for a few weeks and sharing life experience, it became known to Santa Joe that I had participated in the Habitat program while incarcerated. It was not too much longer that he invited me to go up to the project in Woodland Park where he is a site supervisor for Teller County Habitat for Humanity. This was a miracle for me because on one hand I was told I could never volunteer for Habitat, and on another here was the opportunity, a door being opened from a person I never would have expected. I still remember the tears falling down my face as I drove up the pass that day...tears of joy. I still remember the sense of belonging once I stepped foot onto the site. I still remember those that were there that day. I still remember the awkward comfortableness that came when the other volunteers learned of my past, but mostly I remember the acceptance that everyone gave me. It is like they did not judge me on my past, but on how I

was that day.

That day turned into many others. It is so incredible to work alongside other men and women who share their very soul for the same reasons that I found way back in prison. In a way though they also, like my inmate counterparts participate for various reasons, yet the bottom line is that in the end we build dreams that come true for people. After volunteering for some time I was asked to share my story at the luncheon mentioned in the beginning of this, where I was able to see the profound effect Habitat has on people around the world. I met State decision makers, volunteers and hear from recipients their own stories on how Habitat had affected their own lives. There were also some other evolving facts happening in my own life that involvement with these new attitudes and beliefs had created.

When I first volunteered for Habitat I worked nights as a cook. I had progressed from riding a bicycle up to 22 miles a day to get my needs met to driving a car. I lived responsibly and was accountable to others for the first time in my life. Most all of these attributes in my change happened while a resident at the sober house. The application of the "doing" and when my word became my bond. In doing what needed to be done, being honest about my facts and anticipating in the community, whether it was the developing friendships, or family, or people I may never meet, I was able to be a part of, rather than apart from, people in general.

The way I was living became attractive to one woman, her name is Cheryl and we were married on January 1st. of this year. She has four children from previous relations who today I regard as my own flesh and blood. What happened to that selfish, self-centered and dishonest person I had spent a lifetime creating?

I have listened to many speeches, lectures and commentaries on spirituality and religion. I have been through seven treatments and multiple incarcerations, so many in fact that I was able to co-write a syllabus for a program that the Department of Corrections used for substance abuse program. The labels my actions have earned over the years include the following: Addict, alcoholic, criminal, repeat offender, substance abuser, loser, ADD, ADHD, liar, manipulator, worthless...just to share a few.

The undoing has taken time. It has not been easy and I did not do this on my own. The elements Habitat has applied to its vision, coupled with a decision to live differently, has changed the labels associated with my name today. Today as I write this I have been sober more than four and a Half years. The life I lead today I hardly even know that I am on parole. Amazing how when a person lives right, how right that living is honored.

Today the labels associated with my name are these: Husband, friend, sponsor, volunteer, confidant, brother, recovering and this one gets' me every time I hear it spoken from my daughter....daddy. I still volunteer when I can. Am active in our local parish and recently was asked and joined with the Knights of Columbus. On a social economic level, the negative \$50,000 plus impact my behaviors had on our communities have reversed entirely. One hundred, eighty degrees...entirely.

It is not right to generalize the people within Habitat who have paved the way. Who, with an open heart and a mind of discretion, have influenced this journey? People like Jill Sievers, Rick Schaeffer, Joe Monaco, Robbi Riley and Bruno Mattedi, all of whom represent, amongst others, in Teller County, Colorado's Habitat for Humanity. There are the volunteers that have Touched my heart, so many there is not enough room to list all their names here. There is Kim Cooke with Habitat Colorado and let me not leave out another unsung hero that started all this with a lesson on honesty...Ken Baylor, my instructor at Crowley County Correctional Facility.

I have learned that "gratitude" is an action word. To those names mentioned and those that may read or receive this, to you I gratefully swing a hammer for Habitat anytime, anywhere. My life today would not resemble anything it is, without the influence that Habitat for Humanity provided.

Thank you!