

FORSYTH COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Habitat for Humanity

It all happens around a hammer. “A lot of plywood and a hammer,” says Sonja Murray, Development Director of Habitat For Humanity of Forsyth County. “Black and white people, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, work side by side to build a house together. A wall is so important. You focus on building that real wall, doing that physical task, everybody an asset in making it happen, and other kinds of walls start to crack and fall. The white person is just the other guy holding the door for the black man while he works on the frame; the Muslim is someone the Jew has to trust not to drop that piece of sheet rock on his head.”

“In our community,” Murray continues, “no force has the opportunity of doing more good than improving race relations. And 11 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week. It’s ironic that our places of worship are now just about the most segregated places in the county.”

So, in 1996, in an effort to encourage black and white religious congregations to work together, this Habitat for Humanity chapter began using Winston-Salem Foundation grant funds to sponsor the joint project of building homes. By mid-2000, nine houses had been built under that initiative; a tenth had been inspired, jointly sponsored by two women’s groups, the mostly white Junior League and the mostly black sorority of Delta Sigma Theta.

Two of the nine sponsored houses were built by the joint partnership of Redeemer Presbyterian Church and Goler Memorial AME Zion Church. They have since furthered that relationship by attending each other’s services, arranging pulpit switches, choir swaps, and joint musical concerts, and working together to support Kids’ Café, an after-school meals program for young people.

Another of the nine houses was *triple* sponsored. Highland Presbyterian Church and Temple Emanuel, institutions that share a parking lot and had held joint Thanksgiving celebrations, partnered with the Masjid Al’Muminum Mosque. Hundreds of volunteers from all three congregations worked together for four months to build a house for a black Pentecostal Christian woman and her two sons. At the dedication ceremony, a handful of soil from the ground of each of the three congregations was mixed into the earth in front of the house. The three groups of builders and the new occupants prayed that this project might “knit together in enduring affection those who have become friends in this build.” Says Gloria Cole, the homeowner, “If I were blind, you would have to convince me that these people were not my brothers and my sisters.”

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