

BLUE MOUNTAIN'S BEST

By Danielle S. Tepper

As told by **Melissa Siegfried**,
Director of Resource Development

"We don't give houses away." Of the possible misconceptions to have about Habitat for Humanity, Melissa Siegfried, Director of Resource Development for the Lehigh Valley affiliate, says this one may be the most damaging to their vision of "a world where everyone has a decent place to live." (www.habitatlv.org)

"We offer the opportunity for families to get a hand-up, not a handout. That's important," Siegfried says. "A lot of people think we build houses and give them away, but the people always make a huge investment. It's not easy."

The Lehigh Valley affiliate, located in Allentown, was founded in 1989 as a way to help with the local housing crisis.

"Speaking to what we know currently, we're really investing in our neighborhood revitalization," said Siegfried. "It's a new way for us to serve low-income families with an expansion of housing services and products."

"Healthy, affordable housing is the foundation for opportunity and for healthy, fulfilled lives."

Neighborhood revitalization is growing among affiliates, with approximately 250 of them now focusing on it, which Siegfried says means "Habitat is taking more of a listening posture in the community to focus on their needs." There are 1500 affiliates around the world and 49 in Pennsylvania, all of which globally fight poverty housing.

"It kind of works like a franchise; we are each an affiliate of Habitat International and we carry out the global mission locally," explained Siegfried. "We don't receive any financial funding from International; each affiliate stands alone to support their community based on the funding and help we get back from that community."

Most affiliates, like Lehigh Valley, are volunteer-driven.

Blue Mountain's Best Habitat for Humanity Lehigh Valley



Majestic Athletic Team Builder Summer 2014.

Photo provided by HLTV.

Siegfried herself started as a volunteer in October of 2012. Born and raised in Allentown, she knew the reality of sub-standard housing:

"For me personally, our vision that everyone has a decent place to live is my motivation. I know what it's like to live in a bad house with mold and asthma and bad neighborhoods and being afraid and how distracting that is and how that leads to other bad things."

"Healthy, affordable housing is the foundation for opportunity and for healthy, fulfilled lives and that's what keeps me coming in, to fight for that," she continued. "I walked in the door having no knowledge of building or construction. I just offered my services and I was quickly put to work."

She found a permanent home in February of 2013. As Director of Resource Development, she works with the fundraising, donations of materials, corporate sponsorships, team-builders for volunteers, grant-writing, and oversees the neighborhood revitalization and entire volunteer program.

"As most people in nonprofits do, we all wear many, many hats," she laughed. "A typical work day can sometimes feel like you go all the way around the world and back."

The Lehigh Valley Habitat affiliate celebrated its 25th anniversary of serving the Valley in 2014 and reached some significant milestones last year.

They dedicated their 100th home in March of 2014 and also had a group of 12 volunteers raise all the

funding to allow for a global village build in Costa Rica. "That was a great experience for us," said Siegfried. "The need is astronomical. We think poverty housing here is bad, but there, they are literally living in not even shacks, just pieces of metal and tarps."

"ReStores provide an environmentally and socially responsible way to keep good, reusable materials out of landfills. We accept donations of new or gently used building materials and household goods and resell them back to the public."

The Lehigh Valley ReStore opened in 2013. "It's a way for us to sustain our programs," said Melissa Siegfried. "Donate and know that you're supporting a good cause!"

To learn more, visit habitatlvrestore.org.

Habitat for Humanity
of the Lehigh Valley, Inc.
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Fundraising is a huge component of how Habitat is able to operate. Throughout the year, they host three signature events: A Toast to Hope, "She Nailed It" Luncheon, and a Polar Plunge.

The Toast to Hope is their signature event, which is a wine and food tasting and silent auction, typically held in November. They held their 10th annual in 2014.

"She Nailed It" is part of their Women Build initiative. This year will be their third. "We recruit teams of four to fundraise \$250 per person or \$1,000 per team," explained Siegfried. "It's a program that comes from International designed to recruit, educate, and inspire women to break stereotypes."

Their "Plunge For A Purpose" has been rescheduled to April two years in a row due to Dutch Springs being completely frozen, but Siegfried said that doesn't deter plungers from attending. They have around 90 signed up so far and that number keeps growing.

Anyone can participate in these events, and what's more, anyone can donate or volunteer for Habitat, no experience necessary. "Some people think you have to know your way around a hammer and nails, but there are other ways to help," said Siegfried. "Just call us and we'll help you find the right fit."

Every little bit counts. The Habitat LV staff is small, but mighty. There are only 14 total employees, five of which are part-time. "The volunteers are what make it happen," said Siegfried. In 2014, there were 4,600 volunteer events in the Lehigh Valley with the help of 667 volunteers. Numbers like that have quite the impact throughout neighborhoods in need.

"We target specific neighborhoods," said Siegfried. "It's a way for us to have a greater impact from one house and one family at a time to really focusing on full neighborhoods and working on collaborating with other community partners to come together. We see ourselves as a spoke and a wheel for community development."

Habitat undoubtedly offers life-changing work to its web of workers as well as life-changing moments to deserving families. Each home gets a dedication ceremony upon completion and Siegfried says she's shed a tear at almost every one. "It's a chance for the families to thank everyone who's been involved. Each family is special and unique and we get the chance to get to know them," said Siegfried.

One family in particular stands out in her mind: "This past year, there was a dedication for an African refugee family and they had family members come from Africa to reunite with them here," she explained. "During part of the dedication, the family members broke out into song. It



Faith Builders 2013 Blitz Build Volunteers.

Photo provided by HLTV.

was just the most moving, spiritual moment that they were singing this African song together in harmony. It was very emotional."

Siegfried hopes people who aren't as familiar with Habitat's process will recognize that it's "a complex model. The families who receive homes make a huge investment and commitment to being homeowners." [Please see our sidebar for a breakdown of the complete procedure.]

"Also, if you want to keep your donation local, donate directly to us," she said. "We don't get financial support from International, so if you want your money to go to the Valley, keep it in the Valley."

"And we welcome everybody," she added, smiling.

To learn more about Habitat for Humanity Lehigh Valley, visit www.habitatlv.org.

So how does Habitat work?

Director of Resource Development for the Lehigh Valley Habitat affiliate Melissa Siegfried breaks down the process from application to homeownership:

Habitat hosts an orientation once or twice a year depending on where we're building and the funding that we have for it. It's open to anybody who is interested in learning about it to come and hear about expectations and requirements and what to do to become accepted as a "partner family."

Three major criteria for qualification:

1. The family has to have a need for safety/affordable housing. (Low-income families between 35-55% of the area median income.) They have to display that need.

2. They have to have the ability to accept financial responsibility. They must be in a position to make a down payment at closing and pay back a 0% interest mortgage to Habitat. We are the mortgage originators and we collect on all our houses.

3. They must have a willingness to partner. We call them partner families because it is a true partnership. Per adult, each one puts in 250 sweat equity hours building theirs or others' houses or at the ReStore.

After orientation, if someone meets all those requirements and they submit a full application by deadline, it goes to a family selection committee which is a volunteer group led by our family services manager to look over all the criteria that comes down from Habitat International. Vetting begins with that committee; they meet with the families through home visits, they check backgrounds, credit scores, and work history. Once they are deemed to be qualified families, it goes to our board to be reviewed and selected, and then they become one of our partner families. At that point, they start getting their hours in and meet with us once a month to ask questions and understand where they are in the process. They're assigned their own mentor who is with them throughout the process.

The entire process takes 18-24 months from first application to completion of the home. That time frame really depends on the families and how quickly they get their hours in. There are minimums they must meet each month. Some get it done faster than others. It's definitely not an easy process; it requires a lot of planning on the family's part.