Women Build 2021: GSHFH leads by example, encourages women to volunteer

Nearly 15 years ago, Sheri L. Green made a decision that would change the trajectory of her career. Although at the time, she likely didn’t know it.

In circa 2007-2008, Sheri worked for the Western Massachusetts Regional Women’s Correctional Center in Chicopee as an instructor when she and her peers were presented with an opportunity to participate in a Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) Women Build event. Sheri, a handyperson with a knack for repair work and construction, signed up. She and her peers spent the day at a build site in Springfield near Dingle Park. The home was for Cate (pronounced Kay-tee), a single mother with five children. That day changed Sheri’s career path.

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Tyeka Robinson and Marilyn “Matty” Rosa are just two of the everyday heroes from Western Mass Tradeswomen working in partnership with Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) to empower other women during this week’s Women Build event sponsored by Lowe’s. The weeklong activity, from March 8-15, invites women volunteers to build sites to work construction.

This week, volunteers and the GSHFH construction crew are working on a two-story, four-bedroom house in Springfield for single mother Ana and her children.

“This is an awesome opportunity to showcase the skills of women and prove gender shouldn’t dictate capability,” said Brandice J. O’Brien, GSHFH Marketing and Communications manager. “Whether the women on these build sites are construction workers or volunteers, they are simply ‘women helping women’.

Women Build began in 1991 to spread the positive and powerful message, “Women helping women” by facilitating in building stronger and safer communities. During the event, women from all walks of life and skill levels come

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together to work on a job site. Under the guidance of construction professionals, the women learn new skills and add to their repertoire. Matty, a carpenter with the North Atlantic Regional Council of Carpenters Western Massachusetts Local 336, said these events are awesome as they allow women to show their potential and prove women can do the work traditionally done by men. These Women Build opportunities encourage change and empowerment on job sites.

“Women in construction is a great idea and long overdue. Women are smart. They have a great attention to detail and they can swing a hammer just like everybody else,” said Sheri L. Green, GSHFH Construction manager. “Habitat is a great place to come and be involved in the community, to make a difference, and to feel the difference we’re making in the community.”

Sheri, journeyman with the North Atlantic Regional Council of Carpenters Western Massachusetts Local 336, agreed. “I think it’s amazing and it gives women an opportunity to understand the trades – the physical and intellectual parts. This is a hidden gem that a lot of people don’t know about, especially women,” she said. “We were taught we have to be in the kitchen, we have to sew, and we have to cook. No. We can work with our hands and we can make it happen.”

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During the weekend event, volunteers will do inside finish work, paint, install cabinets and countertops, build the front porch rails, and put in the walkway.

To see videos showcasing Habitat weeklong event, go to https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKmV5thN5aAe54JWj5zeFG

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Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity Board of Directors member Cindy Wszolek (left) and Tyeka Robinson, of Western Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity Board of Directors.

Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) Construction Site Supervisor Mary Melchiskey during International Women Build Week.

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Following the experience, Sheri soon began volunteering at GSHFH job sites at least three weekends a month for two years. She earned the construction site supervisor title and enjoyed the service. Yet, life interrupted and Sheri was forced to step away.

Her heart never went far from the GSHFH mission. In 2019, she accepted a full-time position as the GSHFH Construction manager, her dream job. “I just really got into the niche of doing it. It’s just something that stuck with me. I always wanted to be a part of it,” Sheri said. “It’s a good feeling to help the families we help. It’s about the families.”

Sheri’s interest in construction and repair work began at a young age when she would help her dad with various projects, including repairing the basement, rewiring it, and building walls. Between 19 and 21 years old, Sheri worked as a construction laborer or “grunt,” picking up trash at a construction site. She’s also worked other non-construction jobs, but the trade industry has been her passion and she has 27 years in the field.

“I love doing it and having that sense of accomplishment every day,” Sheri said. Aimee Giroux, GSHFH executive director, said the organization is really lucky to have Sheri on the team as she brings a special quality that few contractors possess. “Sheri’s experience as a past volunteer with Greater Springfield Habitat brings an understanding of the value that volunteers bring to our program,” Aimee said. “There are many good contractors in the area, but it takes a special personality to be willing to work with an unskilled all volunteer construction crew and manage to get the job done and have everyone walk away with a smile and sense of accomplishment at the end of the day.”

To see the video clip featuring Sheri, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vs5smfDaA2Y&t=14s

How long have you been a ReStore staff member? I was a ReStore volunteer for three weeks before I got hired in September 2020 and I have enjoyed my time here.

What attracted you to this position and what do you hope to accomplish? I was applying for a NHS (National Honor Society) position and wanted to help somewhere it would make a difference. I hope to acquire better customer service skills, organization skills, and overall knowledge of how a successful business is run.

What motivates you to work hard? I find the goal of feeling accomplished is a great motivator for me. Saving for college is also a huge important factor.

If you could only wear one color for the rest of your life, which would you choose and why?

I would probably wear the color pink or green. I love both and they are just too hard to pick between.

Do you believe in leprechauns? Yes, who wouldn’t!
Congratulations, Toto Mikango family. On Feb. 24, the family of six celebrated the completion of their Springfield three-bedroom home.

The home is the result of a collaboration between Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) and the City of Springfield’s HOME funds. Construction began in early 2019. Since that time, more than 200 volunteers and a considerable amount of youth engagement from YWCA Youth Build, AmeriCorps NCCC teams, Community Works, and students from local colleges helped complete this project.

“I am so glad and joyful in my heart to be here today for the purpose of being housed by Habitat,” said family patriarch TupaTupa Toto in his native Swahili. A translator stood by his side, deciphering his words and heartfelt message.

TupaTupa, his wife Faida Tausi, and their children are a refugee family from Africa who immigrated to the United States in 2015. Under the guidance and support of Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts, they settled in Springfield and enrolled the children in school. In the six years since they arrived, they’ve integrated themselves in the community and expanded their family, welcoming their fourth child.

At church, another refugee told TupaTupa and Faida about Habitat and how his family benefited from the GSHFH homeownership program. Realizing owning a “personal house” is a dream of theirs, they applied to the homeownership program several times before being accepted in October 2020.

“Being able to celebrate these home dedications is probably one of the best parts of this job and knowing we get to build a home for a deserving family,” said Aimee Giroux, GSHFH executive director.

City of Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno spoke of the neighborhood, saying he knows it well. He also mentioned the partnership between GSHFH and Springfield, the work that goes into building a Habitat house, and the value a partner family brings to a new neighborhood.

“This area is my old stomping ground. My grandparents lived here, so I know this area very, very well and the sweat equity you, Mr. Mikango, and your family have put into this home, we deeply appreciate that,” Mayor Sarno said. “What I appreciate immensely is a good and beautiful family that is going to help make this neighborhood and this area stronger.”

Welcome home, Toto Mikango family.

Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Aimee Giroux speaks during the Feb. 24 dedication ceremony in Springfield.

Homes, Community, Hope + You opportunity in Greater Springfield

Now through April 30, Habitat for Humanity and Circle K have teamed up for a unique opportunity. At checkout, you can make a donation to support a nonprofit of their choice AND Habitat for Humanity is one of the options!! Be sure to stop by your local Circle K today! Choose and support Habitat for Humanity!

Area Circle Ks:
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- 625 Homestead Ave, Holyoke
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- 1400 Russell Road, Westfield

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Save the date! Wednesday, April 21, a virtual dedication ceremony via Facebook Live

ReStore Rivalry voting begins March 17

It’s almost time! ReStore Rivalry pieces have been restored and pictures will soon be posted for judging! Stay tuned!

For more information, go to habitatspringfield.org/restore-rivalry

Cars for Homes
Have an idle car collecting dust? Need a tax deduction? See if you qualify.

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