

# Perspectives

## on KwaZulu-Natal

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### **Building houses and building communities**

A large vacant plot of land in Sherwood is to be transformed in five days in June next year when a few thousand volunteers, including former United States president Jimmy Carter, are to build 100 houses. The project is initiated by the international organisation Habitat for Humanity as part of the annual Jimmy Carter Work Project.

The Sherwood site, which is near the intersection of the main N2 and N3 freeways is part of Cato Manor, which was the site of forced removals by the apartheid government during the 1950s and 1960s. "When you look at the mango trees growing there you will realise that there used to be real communities located on that site, so it is only fitting that we return a new community to the site," the deputy mayor of the eThekweni council, Logie Naidoo said at a Habitat function recently.

Habitat is a non-profit, Christian housing organisation that works throughout the world to try and eliminate poverty housing from the world. Since the project was initiated in 1974 in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), more than 110,000 houses have been built.

The houses are sold to the families at no profit and are financed with affordable, no interest loans. However, Habitat emphasises that the programme does not just give houses away. In addition to down payment and monthly loan payments, homeowners have to invest 'sweat equity' or hours of their own labour into building their house and the houses of others. People are only selected if they have no house at all. The houses have four rooms, including two bedrooms, and have a basic bathroom that usually has a septic tank.

This community interaction is particularly important to the philosophy of Habitat. In addition to assisting to building neighbours' houses, recipients of Habitat houses pay monthly loan payments into a revolving fund that is used to build more houses. Habitat's work with communities starts with a network of community-based organisations that assist with family selection.

The Jimmy Carter Work Project is held every year and Carter and his wife Rosalyn attend the final week. As part of the 2002 project, Habitat will build 1,000 houses in 18 countries in Africa, with the final 100 being built in Durban from June 3 until June 7. A total of 300 houses will be built in South Africa as part of the whole project.

According to Habitat, about 25 percent of the world's population - more than a billion people - is estimated to be living in substandard housing, or have no home at all. Naidoo says that South Africa is facing a unique housing problem. "Whereas most countries are mainly focussing on meeting the emerging demand for housing resulting from new families and change in family size, South Africa has to first grapple with the two to three million housing backlog which is a legacy of

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past neglect of the plight of the majority of our people by the apartheid government and then on top of this we have the growth as a result of the same factors affecting other countries. According to Naidoo, more than 900,000 people are living in about 540 informal settlements in Durban. He says that the council had estimated that it would take about 15 years to wipe out the backlog at the current rate of housing development.

The volunteers descending on Sherwood are an essential part of Habitat's programme. It uses volunteer labour and donations of money and material to build and renovate simple, decent houses with the help of the homeowner families. Volunteers make themselves available on a short or long-term basis. New Yorker Kelli Givens originally spent some time building houses in Durban in May and June last year. A former owner of four McDonalds and 47 Pizza Hut franchises in New York and Massachusetts, Givens had just sold all the businesses and was doing volunteer work when she decided to give some time to Habitat in South Africa. She was so taken by the Habitat process, and particularly by the initiative in South Africa that she offered to volunteer for Habitat in South Africa for three years. On arriving in South Africa in August, Givens received the title of resource development associate and is responsible primarily for fundraising.

However, she believes in being part of the entire process and getting her hands dirty. She gets out of the office, usually building houses herself, at least once a week where she becomes part of the community building aspect of Habitat. She says that her fundraising endeavours also make more sense if she has personal stories to tell. Habitat is widely known in the United States, but in South Africa Givens has faced more of a challenge by having to explain the programme. She has many stories to tell about taking corporate employees out to building sites, which are often in townships, and getting them involved in the physical labour of building. "When you put a shovel in everyone's hand, everyone is equal," she says.

Givens says that one visit to a build was particularly remarkable for her when a group of corporate accountants were particularly frustrating by the difficulties encountered getting to the site even in a 4x4 vehicle because of heavy rains the previous night. One senior executive suddenly realised during the arduous trip that it was no wonder his junior assistant, with whom he had worked for years, arrived late at work when it rained. Givens said that you could really see "the light bulb go off" as the businesspeople realised some of the difficulties faced by people living outside of cities and more wealthy residential suburbs.

Givens finds her work particularly interesting because the housing issues in South Africa are so large. "The relevance of what we are doing is beyond belief." She has found South Africans to be some of the hardest working people that she has ever met, often for very little money. As a result, she says, it often takes longer to build the houses because the homeowners are working six or seven days a week and have little time to put in their own 'sweat equity'.

It is not only foreign volunteers who are making themselves available for Habitat's activities. In addition to taking corporate employees out to sites, Givens says that she often gets phone calls from some of those who have been on the trip saying that they have some free time and asking if they can volunteer again. During a recent build in Cape Town about 200 students aged between about 19 and 23, built 15 houses in five days. Some gave up their vacations, while others made time in between writing examinations.

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The enthusiasm of Givens and others suggests that volunteers can certainly benefit from assisting an organisation such as Habitat. The difference that a house can make to many South Africans who have not ever dreamt of the possibility of owning their own home is also heart-warming. Says Naidoo about the Sherwood housing project: "Sadly we cannot ever undo or erase the pain and destruction of the apartheid system, but by building communities we can begin to rebuild our cities and our nation. We can restore dignity to our people - dignity they should never have lost"

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