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Habitat for Humanity is the benefactor of a birthday party

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Problem housing levels are near 70 percent in Baldwin County. This includes substandard home conditions, those with no home and people who pay more than 30 percent of income for housing.

Habitat for Humanity of Milledgeville/Baldwin County is a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing ministry that builds decent and affordable homes for those in need. Since the local outfits incorporation in 1994, Habitat has built 18 homes.

To qualify, people must develop a partnership with the organization through at least 300 sweat equity labor hours and other financial contributions to Habitat.

The misconception that the nonprofit gives away houses couldn't be further from the truth, according to Milledgeville/Baldwin County executive director Murali Thirumal. If owners don't make their interest-free 20-year mortgage payments and maintain the homes in a responsible manner, foreclosure rarely does, but could happen.

"One of the things that has to be very clear is Habitat for Humanity doesn't give away houses. If that word responsibility gets dropped, we will foreclose," Thirumal said. "We work like no other lender. I've been here for 16 weeks now, and the hardest thing for me to do is the foreclosure."

Nearly every one of the homes in the local Habitat network continues successful monthly payments returned into a revolving Fund for Humanity assisting future house construction.

Constant engagement with the homeowner provides them every chance to succeed living the American dream.

"Building houses is important. If we run a tight ship holding people responsible and enable them to do the right thing, I think we'll be very impressed with our return on investment," Thirumal said.

Community fundraising events play a major role in not only local awareness, but also moving the meter nationally for Habitat's mission.

Tatum Swearingen decided her 7th birthday party Sept. 15 would be all about donations for a new home. Having a young girl willing to forego gifts for a greater cause means a lot.

Her mother Dawn said they were watching a Disney Channel feature on a little girl collecting shoes to send around the world. They came to Thirumal with the idea, and the focus switched to local housing need. Instead of shoes, Swearingen wants to build a home.

Dawn said her daughter loves giving back. They are active in local church activ-

ities including volunteering time in a soup kitchen.

The mother wasn't all for the idea until she realized Habitat's process doesn't give away homes. Party with a Purpose, hosted by SportFit, lets kids know they can make a difference.

There is no age limit on giving or need. Children, not just adults, suffer without a roof over their head, according to Dawn.

"She wants to build a house. That's her focus now. She is going to build a house for somebody that needs it," Dawn said. "If you give, it does come back to you. At some point we have all been in need. As far as a child, we have been trying to keep her out front."

Thirumal said the philosophical message of a child giving up her gifts for a greater cause is tremendous.

"For us, the messaging is huge in a party like that. Foundations are looking to see if the communities are really supporting this," the Habitat director said. "When they see support, the immediate messages that go up to the big donors are wow the community must be behind them. They don't want to give to a failing organization or one that isn't supported by the community."

Beyond building houses, the local Habitat features a ReStore with gently used house wares and various other items sold at discounted prices to the public. Profits provided a nice boost for the monthly bottom line.

In the 2012 fiscal year, the Restore averaged \$420 a week. Since July 1, the store's take has more than doubled.

National stores like Tractor Supply Company and Lowe's donate to the ReStore along with charitable individuals.

Carole Babb, ReStore manager, said giving used or salvaged goods supports Habitat, reduces landfill content and provides a service by having items at a low cost. Together with rotating volunteers Harriett Davis and Doris Boyd, Babb loves the ReStore.

"It's a wonderful place to work. I love everybody who works here. We share a common interest of helping the community," Babb said.

Davis got hooked on Habitat after building a home for her church pastor 10 years ago. She is a rotating board member and

works at the ReStore four days a week, where toys and the joys of reading are shared with children.

"We enjoy our customers. We look forward to seeing them," Davis said. "They come in looking for deals, and we have great stuff."

Habitat offers more volunteer opportunities than just physical construction labor through the ReStore. Donations of paint, furniture, furnishings, dishes, books and hardware help the cause.

Habitat believes charity begins at home and events like Party with a Purpose make a difference in achieving a goal of \$100,000 by next year. The numbers turn into the black attracted the attention of Habitat for Humanity International to Milledgeville.

According to Thirumal, a case study begins in four weeks analyzing the local chapter's positive work.

With mortgages up 34 percent, the organizational supports continue strengthening.

"We are trying to get to a sustainable point. If we can sustain, then every penny that comes in will roll out to build another house. Right now, we are playing catch up," Thirumal said.

The person donating the most at Swearingen's party wins three-hour limo use courtesy of Milledgeville Limousine Service. SportFit is located on 129 Blandly Way across from Walter B. Williams Park. Party hours are 9:30 a.m. to noon.

Call Habitat for Humanity at (478) 453-2829 or email habitatforhumanity@windstream.net for information. The 730 N. Wayne St. location is on Facebook and Twitter.

