

Habitat for Humanity of Hendry County has transcended the bias of race, social class, gender and religion to create a more just and inclusive society for families in a small rural county in Florida. Habitat embodies all that could be expected of a true Christian ministry aimed at crossing common American divisions and spreading the love of God to all it touches.

In 1997, Sister Marie-Louise Wolfington planned to enact social change by creating Habitat for Humanity of Hendry County. The poor housing conditions of that agricultural community were begging for attention. More than 60% of the residents were living in "non-permanent housing". This was a place where people worked very hard, but many were trapped and just needed "a hand-up not a hand-out".

Marie-Louise's goal was to start the home building and family placement as soon as possible. In order to bring this ministry to life she needed to put her plan into motion. She sought out a few crucial volunteers, people of faith and commitment, willing to roll up their sleeves and do the Lord's work. She asked and she received. She found a banker, a chamber of commerce president, several influential ministers, a social worker, a couple of business and restaurant owners, and a retired U.S. Army Colonel. Sister quickly promoted this willing flock to the Board of Directors.

In order to shorten the learning curve and commence with her plan of action Sister Marie-Louise traveled the entire SW Florida region seeking assistance and guidance from the surrounding Habitats. Sister was so diligent in her pursuit of assistance she even persuaded Millard Fuller, the founder and President of Habitat for Humanity International, to come to the parish hall and speak to a full house of curious, potential volunteers. This proved to be invaluable in creating enthusiasm and starting the engine of this vessel of God's love.

Sister assigned each Director a piece of her plan in order to acquire all the necessities: land, building supplies, office space, qualified families, a corps of volunteers and media coverage. Within a few months enough land had been donated to build several houses, families had been selected to work towards home ownership, building supplies were coming in from local merchants, Wal-Mart and surrounding affiliates, local tradesmen volunteered plumbing and electrical services, McDonald's sent over bags and bags of hamburgers to feed the volunteers, and the local Kiwanis Thrift store gave the new homeowners an allowance to purchase items for their homes. It seemed like a lot was happening at that point, but it didn't stop there, the miracle of people, all kinds of people (different colors, age, gender, religion, economic conditions) came out to nail walls, raise roofs, paint, lay sod and everything else it took to get families into their own homes.

The first four home owners in the Habitat for Humanity of Hendry County program blew the top off the picture of traditional home ownership. These new home owners were an African American single mother of three, an older Hispanic couple with the husband being partially paralyzed, a young blind couple and a Caucasian family of six that had been living in a condemned house trailer. [Sister's favorite, the Colonial (to this day the greatest leader of the Hendry

Habitat) was always so proud to note that many of his volunteers were building better houses than the those his volunteers returned to each evening.] This was further evidence of God's love and will in action when people would ignore their own economic conditions to help their neighbor.

Financing any humanitarian organization is often the most daunting task. During the first five years of Habitat of Hendry's existence Sister Marie-Louise miraculously created several ways to provide funding to further the organization. Her first idea was a brilliant one, she was the very first person to register her Habitat for Humanity organization with the national website that picked up donated cars and in turn donated money to a selected nonprofit. Thanks to the quick thinking of Marie-Louise, every time anyone in the United States donated a car and wanted to make a donation to Habitat for Humanity that money was only given to the Hendry County Habitat for Humanity. This windfall lasted for several years. Her next funding project was to open a thrift store that served Habitat and the community. In an impoverished area it proved to be an affordable place to shop, a place for home owner candidates to work and earn sweat equity, and a place to house the office of the organization; this too lasted many years.

While the starting-up and building of the organization were themselves a labor of love, planning for the long-term existence, leadership and financial stability would prove to be Marie-Louise's most worrisome task. As her time in Hendry County was drawing short, her greatest plan of all came to fruition. She reached out to the affiliate in the neighboring county and after lengthy discourse convinced their leadership to adopt Habitat of Hendry and make it their chapter. Now she didn't approach just any Habitat. This was Habitat for Humanity of Lee County, the third largest affiliate in the United States and it was only 30 miles away. The Lee County Habitat was firmly established and a well-oiled machine that was producing and functioning at the highest levels, consistently building over 100 homes a year. Lee Habitat had the wherewithal to carry Hendry County into the foreseeable future. Although some thought it was not prudent to give up local control Sister knew that her fledgling organization was too fragile to survive on its own and continue to provide housing for God's people in need. In 2011 Habitat for Humanity of Hendry County became a permanent part of the dynamic affiliate which is now known as Habitat for Humanity of Lee and Hendry Counties.

When Sister Marie-Louise left Hendry County in 2007 eleven families that never thought it would be possible were enjoying home ownership. At the conclusion of 2017 there were 42 families living and thriving from the benefits of home ownership made possible by Habitat for Humanity.

By creating this Christian ministry and living Habitat's motto "Give a hand-up not a hand-out", Sister and friends enabled families to help themselves to own their homes and give them security, stability and bright futures.