



sweet dreams

By Sarah Libbon \ Photography by John Linn

OUR 2009 OUTSTANDING NONPROFIT

Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity

ST. CLOUD

At Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity, Marianne Miller is a symbol of hope for hard-working families who can't quite reach the American Dream. And for those who had it and lost it.

Her story begins with a migraine headache, in her middle-class life in a Twin Cities home. But it wasn't a headache. A massive brain aneurysm left her legally blind, hearing-impaired, and unable to walk or talk due to debilitating weakness on her left side. Her husband left her, too.

After months and a miracle recovery, she started over again in St. Cloud with new disabilities, mounting bills, and three children to raise on her own. She found a low-income apartment near her sister, in a neighborhood where she often heard gunshots and witnessed drug activity.

"I didn't know if we'd ever be able to have a real home again," she said.

Her sister pushed her to attend one of Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity's informational meetings in 2005, where she began a three-year process of becoming a homeowner again.

"Many people don't understand the partnership we enter into with families," said Bruce Johnson, Habitat for Humanity executive director. "The expectations are high. We don't give hand-outs, we give hand-ups."

Habitat doesn't give away homes. Out of hundreds of applicants, Habitat selects only a few qualified candidates each year. At minimum, they must currently live in substandard housing, meet an income requirement, demonstrate a solid employment history, donate 200 hours of sweat equity, and attend homeownership education classes. After homes are built, owners must also make mortgage and utility payments.

Miller remembers the day she walked to the mailbox and saw a letter from Habitat. "I was shaking," she said. "It said, 'Congratulations, you're accepted.' I didn't believe that it would ever happen for us."

Johnson said homeownership is key to breaking the poverty cycle. "When parents raise their families in a decent home, children have the opportunity to grow instead of wondering if they're going to be cold, have a bed to sleep in, or have enough food," he added. "It allows them to have hope, faith, and trust in their lives."

Another goal of Habitat is to build the skills of its homeowners—from financial literacy to hanging drywall—infusing families with pride and the confidence to handle maintenance and repairs. Projects bring together the skills and generosity of hundreds of volunteers. "We link those in need with those who can help," Johnson said.

Miller and her family logged hundreds of volunteer hours for Habitat, and they still do. "My kids laid sod at one of the homes, served lunch to volunteers, and helped me make blankets for one of the local shelters."

With economic challenges of rising unemployment and home foreclosures, Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity is ramping up efforts to help meet the growing need for affordable housing. Their upward climb began in 2004, when board and senior staff were selected to the

Initiative Foundation's Healthy Organizations Partnership (HOP) program. The HOP program trains nonprofit leaders to run effective organizations that achieve greater results in their communities. Through the program, Habitat created a five-year strategic plan and set a goal of increasing construction from about three homes per year to at least ten by 2010. Eight homes were built in 2008.



Marianne Miller and family.

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"They are an inspiration to those of us who believe in the power of committed volunteers, and that change is best achieved by helping people to help themselves," said Cathy Hartle, Initiative Foundation senior program manager for organizational effectiveness. "They used our leadership training to move their organization to a new level."

In fall 2008, Miller and her three children crossed the threshold into their new home. The site was selected for its location on a bus route and within walking distance to work for Marianne, who can no longer drive.

"It's a dream come true and well worth the wait," Miller said. "If it wasn't for Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity, I'd still be in that apartment and still be afraid for my children's safety."

The Millers' home is also the first "green" home built by Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity. The Central Minnesota Builders Association donated high-efficiency, low-impact building materials for the demonstration project, which was featured at a building expo and used to train other builders. Leaders hope that incorporating such elements into future Habitat homes will keep utility bills affordable.

Since 1989, Central Minnesota Habitat for Humanity has helped 54 families move into safe, affordable housing. Remarkably, 52 of those 54 families still live in their Habitat homes—many remain active volunteers.

"My family and I plan to always give back to Habitat for Humanity for what they've done for us," Miller said.