



President Helps Build American Dream

by John D. Wagner

Okay, so you've been the president of the United States, held the fate of the free world in your hands, and dined with kings and tribal chiefs. Now what are you going to do? Well, when Jimmy Carter left the White House in 1980, he didn't retire to a mountain-top range to play checkers. In fact, his very first public commitment after leaving the White House was to join the Georgia-based Habitat for Humanity, a group that builds "decent homes in decent communities" for people who are otherwise unable to buy a home at all. To date, Habitat has built over 3,000 homes in 240 American cities and 25 foreign countries. They accept no government funding, and with an annual budget approaching 18 million dollars, this non-profit group doesn't look as if it's about to slow down.

Applicants for homes built by Habitat must fulfill some basic income criteria and participate in 125 hours of service to Habitat projects: 50 hours in advance, and 75 hours on their own future home. Much of the material and almost all of the labor is volunteered, and when the home is finished, Habitat sells it at an average cost of between \$25,000 and \$30,000, mortgaged over 20 to 25 years with no interest. The payments the homeowners make contribute to a rotating fund that is used to build even more homes.

The homes are finished very quickly too. In Charlotte, North Carolina, after just five days—with Jimmy Carter's help—14 new homes were ready for owners to move in. And once they are moved in, Habitat has had good experience with its homeowners. In fact, they have not

had to foreclose on any home they've sold.

Jimmy Carter's involvement came when Habitat's founder, Millard Fuller, visited with the Carters after the President had expressed interest in the group. He and Rosalynn agreed to join and Jimmy served for three years on Habitat's board of directors. (Rosalynn now serves on the Board.) But this wasn't another case of a celebrity simply lending his name to a worthy cause. Carter went out, hammer in hand, and worked on sites in New York City and Charlotte, North Carolina. He explains that one of the reasons he devotes so much time to the group is because "Habitat for Humanity has successfully removed the stigma of charity by substituting it with a sense of partnership. The people who will live in the homes work side by side with the volunteers, so they feel very much that they are on an equal level. For many of these people, this is the first time in their lives that they have felt a real sense of accomplishment." When Carter is on the job, Habitat treats him like an ordinary volunteer—sending him to the job site in a bus, assigning him a bunk in the dormitory. He has a standing commitment to work for the group one week each year for as long as he is able. "I've learned more about the needy than I ever did as governor, as a candidate or as president. The sacrifice I thought I would be making turned out to be one of the greatest blessings of my life," says Carter who also noted that his co-worker Rosalynn "never looked more beautiful" than with a hammer in hand and sweat on her brow, while working on a Habitat house. ■



Habitat for Humanity's most famous carpenter Jimmy Carter helps out on one of the 3,000 homes Habitat has completed to date.



With Carter's help, a Charlotte, North Carolina Habitat for Humanity project completed 14 houses in just five days.



People who are going to occupy a Habitat for Humanity home must work at least 75 hours on their own home and 50 hours on another Habitat project. Photo by Vonnee Sleighter.