



President George Bush and First Lady Laura Bush participated “hands on” as part of the Heart of Texas Builders Association’s involvement in Habitat for Humanity’s World Leaders Build 2001.

Habitat Habitat

Builders volunteer to do what they do best — provide homes

by Kirsten Voinis

Home builders have been strong partners in the work of Habitat for Humanity’s 91 Texas affiliates over the years. After all, both have the same goal — help more Americans realize the dream of homeownership.

But 2006 will be a historic year for both Habitat for Humanity and the builders who donate their time, talents, money, materials and manpower to the organization.

Habitat for Humanity is gearing up for the largest blitz build in its history — 1,000 houses across the United States from June 5-9 — and Texas builders will be playing a

large role. Texas Habitat for Humanity affiliates will build 88 of the 1,000 houses, and builders in cities and towns across Texas have signed up to participate.

Combined efforts in Harris County will result in 38 new homes, making it the largest single city effort in the United States. Six of the homes in Houston will be built by volume builders Lennar and KB Home. And the Heart of Texas Builders Association (HOTBA) will celebrate its 50th anniversary by participating in the blitz.

HOTBA gained national headlines for Habitat for Humanity’s World Leaders Build 2001 when President

George W. Bush, First Lady Laura Bush and other dignitaries traveled to Waco to swing a hammer.

The Heart of Texas BA’s involvement with Habitat actually started in 1989, when it helped build a “72-Hour House.”

“When I came to work here, my job was to create a better image for the builders association,” said HOTBA Executive Director Kay Vinzant. “One of the things we did was start contributing toward Habitat.”

Participation in and support of Habitat by both builders and HBAs vary. Some builders volunteer as individuals, while

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others join in HBA projects. And while some HBAs organize builds, others help in different ways. For example, the Rio Grande Valley Builders Association last year sponsored a hole in the local Habitat affiliate's fund-raising golf tournament.

Following the World Leaders Build event, the HOTBA endowed an annual scholarship at local McLennan Community College to help new Habitat homeowners continue their education and further improve their lives. The BA also donates a portion of its Parade of Homes ticket proceeds to the local Habitat affiliate.

Likewise, individuals can help in a variety of ways, said Joel Katz, Texas Association of Builders treasurer and an Austin custom builder who sits on the board of directors for Habitat's Austin affiliate.

"So many people want to hammer, and there are other jobs that need to be done," he said. "I enjoy going out there and feeding the workers. There's just so many ways that you can help."

Katz became involved with Habitat in 1997, when he was president of what's now the Greater Austin HBA. Habitat was looking for help from the construction industry, because most of its volunteers had passion for their cause, but no home building experience.

Since then, Austin's building community has become more involved with Habitat, said Katz, who promotes the organization to his colleagues and has recruited other builders to serve with him on the local Habitat board of directors.

"I just feel like we have to give back to the community, because there but for the grace of God go us," Katz said.

While builders obviously have much to offer Habitat, those who get involved find they also get something in return.

"With a lot of charities, you give money and that's all you do," said Brian Binash, corporate secretary for the Houston Habitat for Humanity board and president of Wilshire Homes Houston. "You go to a ball, you go to an auction and that's it. With Habitat, you get to see the tangible results of what you're doing. ... You get to see the joy and happiness on their face the day they move in."

Katz said, "They just appreciate what they have. A lot of them could not ever dream of owning a home, and for them it's just a dream come true."

Most builders become hooked on Habitat after their first exposure, say representatives of both Habitat for Humanity and the building industry.

"Any time we choose to do one, our builders are ready to go," Vinzant said. "Our guys are so generous; if we ask them to do it, they volunteer. And some of them volunteer on a regular basis, donating materials and support."

In Austin, Centex Homes frequently volunteers, said Mitchell Gibbs, communication director for Austin's Habitat affiliate, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2005. David Weekley Homes created the David Weekley Austin team to work with the organization. On its first project, company employees and vendor volunteers built a home for a single Austin mother and her three children in just five days.

"Those folks who've known us and had the experience with us certainly put out the challenge to other builders to get involved and have fun with us," Gibbs said.

Binash agrees that Habitat is not a hard sell for builders, many of whom repeatedly volunteer.

"We've found that builders are generous with time and money and efforts to give back to their community," Binash said. "And it's a natural cause and tie (to their business)."

To learn more about Habitat for Humanity or its Home Builder Blitz 2006, visit www.habitat.org. ■

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A 100-member team from David Weekley Homes built a home for a single Austin mother and her three children in five days in summer 2005. Those participating in the groundbreaking were homeowners-to-be Nicole and Charlene Clark (far left) and David Weekley, chairman of the board (fourth from left).

