

25 YEARS

A weeklong celebration of 25 years of Kearney Area Habitat for Humanity, set for July 30 – Aug. 5, will bring together homeowners, volunteers, donors and others who have had a hand in building simple, decent homes for and with God’s people in need.

The Kearney affiliate, which last year celebrated building its 200th home—74 in Kearney—and 126 in third world countries, grew out of a desire by four men to put their Christian faith into action.

In many ways, they were an unlikely foursome— *Bill Ballou*, who has The Solid Rock religious bookstore, is a member of the Evangelical Free Church; *Jerry Marlatt*, who owned Marlatt Machine Shop, is a Methodist; and *Jim McKenzie*, an Edward Jones financial adviser, and *Joe Methe*, owner of Methe Insurance Agency, are both Catholics.

Three of the four—Ballou, McKenzie and Methe—were part of a Bible study group that met at 6:30 Friday mornings for doughnuts and devotions at St. Luke’s Good Samaritan Center.

“We met there, because that’s where Bill Gullickson lived,” Methe said. As their Bible study continued, Methe said, “The inspiration came to us that we should be doing something for others.”

Joined by Marlatt, the four set out to put their faith into practice. The original idea began small, with the four doing handyman projects for people who needed assistance. One of the first jobs was for their friend Gullickson, whose hip issues limited his mobility. He needed a ramp to access a home that had two steps at the entry.

Another project was for a 70-year-old cook at a local restaurant. When she left for work at 5 a.m., she had to make her way across a pad of loose concrete blocks that served as her porch. They built her a deck with a railing and steps.

The four reached a tipping point after they had reattached a bathroom sink to the wall for an elderly woman, who sat watching television while they worked. When the job was finished, instead of a “Thank you,” the woman pointed to yet another project she wanted done.

“There was just something missing,” McKenzie said of the experience. The others echoed his sentiment. Although they didn’t know it then, the conversation they had afterwards while leaning over the bed of McKenzie’s green pickup would be the catalyst for a movement that would forever change the lives of families they had yet to meet, and of course, their lives, too.

That afternoon, McKenzie went home, turned on the television and was scanning channels when he “...heard some guy talking about construction. It was Jimmy Carter talking about building with and for people in need.”

The “with” stood out in McKenzie’s mind.

He called Plains, GA, and asked for Jimmy Carter’s number. Instead, the operator directed him to the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum. When he started to explain what he was calling about, the receptionist said, “Oh, you mean Habitat for Humanity.”

And so it began.

They contacted Habitat for Humanity International for information. Closer to home, Marlatt’s son-in-law, a Methodist minister in the Omaha area, knew the building superintendent for the Omaha Habitat affiliate. He was a member of his congregation.

Marlatt contacted the building superintendent, and on Dec. 2, 1991, Marlatt, McKenzie and Methe went to Omaha where they helped paint a Habitat rehab house and learned more about the organization.

As they talked on the way home, Marlatt said, “We thought it (Habitat) sounded like what we needed.”

McKenzie also remembers Marlatt’s insightful comment that a Habitat home would be about much more than a house. That for the new homeowners, having a stable home would be life-changing.

Methe, who had experience in construction, was less confident about the prospects. He told McKenzie and Marlatt, “It’s going to take 100’s (of volunteers). This is not a ‘me, you and Jerry’ thing.’ It’s going to take lots of people.”

Undaunted, they formed a temporary steering committee of eight.

“We met over the noon hours at Jim’s (McKenzie’s) office,” Methe said. “We were wanting to get all the pieces together, because Habitat has lots of pieces. A lot of work went into it. Everyone kind of pitched in.”

The group’s enthusiasm for the project was further fueled by the results of a Hanna:Keelan Associates housing study done for the City of Kearney that year. The study pointed to the critical need for simple, decent housing.

While the four knew there was a need, they did not know if there was enough interest in the community to support a Habitat affiliate. It had been a little over a month since their trip to Omaha when they held the public meeting that Jan. 14, 1992, at the Salvation Army building. The Kearney Hub ran a news brief about the meeting, but the group had no idea how many, if any, would attend.

Methe recalls McKenzie’s directions as they set up the meeting room, “It’s always better to have to set up more chairs.” Both McKenzie and Methe chuckled as they recalled the night. They set up 30 chairs; 81 attended.

"It was a wonderful but scary moment," McKenzie said, adding that more than 200 had expressed interest.

"They (Habitat International) had this book, and we followed that," Marlatt said, explaining how the steering committee structure was determined.

On Aug. 4, they officially became Kearney Area Habitat for Humanity, an affiliate of Habitat for Humanity International. While it usually takes 14-18 months to establish an affiliate, the Kearney affiliate was established in nine.

The momentum fueled their work on the first build site. Kearney Habitat broke ground on its first home on Aug. 28, and on Nov. 22, 1992 just four months later, the home, located at 1311 Ave. D, was dedicated.



As the organization was being established, the group sought much needed financial support. The first donation was a \$10,000 check from an anonymous donor. "The initial check came from someone who understood what we were aspiring to do," McKenzie said, describing it as "Very significant."

Marlatt and McKenzie then went to Platte Valley State Bank, explained what they were planning to do, and asked for an "...up to \$25,000 loan-- at no interest, with no collateral and no signatures." The bank said they'd get back to them. And they did. Only they upped the amount to \$30,000.

McKenzie said, "It was a reconfirmation of what we were doing. It was in the same category of the first \$10,000. "We never needed it," he said, adding that the Kearney community and churches have been generous.

"The churches and Carpenter Club donors are the life blood of Kearney Habitat. Some have been giving for 25 years and have never missed," McKenzie said.

Covenant Churches were also a vital part of the early support. Covenant Churches signed an agreement to pray for Kearney Habitat, provide volunteers and make a monetary donation. Among the Covenant Churches were the Evangelical Free Church, First Lutheran Church, First Presbyterian Church, St. James Catholic Church, Prince of Peace Catholic Church and Faith United Methodist Church.

Ken Mumm, current Kearney Habitat board president, said that in those years, few area churches had a "home mission" project. For those churches, Kearney Habitat became that project. Churches and service clubs were often key supporters for blitz builds.

Ballou described blitz builds, where a home is built in a week, as "very important."

Various service groups would sponsor a day for \$6,000. One year, Kearney Public Schools administrators personally gave 50 percent of the cost of a day, and the Kearney Education Association (KEA) providing the other half.

"Blitz builds are relationship builders," Ballou said. "We had a lot of key people in the community involved."

A memorable blitz build for the four founders took place June 27, 1996, when Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity International, came to take part in a Kearney Habitat blitz build. Kearney Habitat volunteers on a blitz build with Fuller in Romania sometime later would note with some pride that on the Romanian build, Fuller wore his t-shirt from the Kearney blitz.



Al Schellhase, Joe, Jerry and the one and only, Millard Fuller

In addition to the build in Romania, Kearney Habitat volunteers have helped build homes in Africa, Costa Rica, Haiti, Mexico, Vietnam and the Philippines. They've also helped build homes throughout the United States.

Ballou and other Kearney Habitat volunteers took part in two Carter Work Projects—Eagle Butte, South Dakota., in 1994, and Pikeville, Kentucky, in 1997. Both times, Ballou set up live remotes from the build locations with KGFW News Director Paul Wice on KGFW Radio.

"I was on at 9:30 Wednesday morning live from South Dakota," Ballou said. He did the same from Kentucky. "We all (the founders) had different visions. I wanted to acquaint people with the Habitat for Humanity mission. I'm a relationship builder. I did not go there (Carter Work Projects) to work." But, of course, he did work. He worked hard at building relationships that would be helpful to Kearney Habitat.

After the Carter Work Project in South Dakota, he invited the executive director of the Eagle Butte Habitat affiliate and one of the new homeowners to speak at the next annual banquet. The executive director spoke for five minutes; the new homeowner spoke for three. Although they were brief, Ballou said their presentations were effective.

"I probably had a better vision on how to connect people," he said. "If 10 people go to a build, take two along who do not have the vision."

He had a similar approach when he brought in speakers for fundraising banquets. He would sell 8 people seats for a table of 10, and give the two extra tickets free to homeowners.

Fundraising banquets, board of directors' retreats and various other special events were all a part of Ballou's contribution to the group.

"He (Ballou) knows how to pump up the crew," Marlatt said.

One year, Barry Long from Habitat for Humanity International was the banquet speaker. Two hundred people attended; \$20,000 was raised.

“Sometimes people would ask me about the various speakers we brought in, ‘How did you get him here?’” and Ballou said. “Well, you ask!”

McKenzie described Ballou saying, “Bill has a boldness. He knows how to network, and he knows people in all of the churches.”

To a person, the four attribute Kearney Habitat’s solid financial support to tithing. From the beginning, the group has tithed to Habitat International on every donation and, until they needed to buy land for new homes, on every homeowner’s mortgage payment as well. Each peppers his conversation about the group’s successes with “God moments” and “Kingdom moments.”

Methe recalls his experience with fundraising for Kearney Habitat. As Marlatt spent funds on building materials, Methe would caution him. “Jerry, we don’t have the money.”

“I took it on (fundraising) as a personal responsibility,” Methe said. “We’d come to a meeting and have \$2,700 in bills, and then there’d be checks in the mail. The donations would cover our bills, with just a little extra. For ten consecutive months, the money came in from the most unlikely sources. I finally accepted that it was in God’s hands. I think its (Habitat) God inspired.

Marlatt said, “People would say, ‘We’ve got all these bills. How are we going to pay for that? We are going to be so in debt.’ I had no question that we did not have a problem.”

“I really believe that’s because we tithe,” Methe said. “We just got blessings—people, materials, whatever we needed. It just blew me away.”

For McKenzie, he recalls early on serving as president, secretary and treasurer of the organization, all at the same time. “I’m thinking about what to do. We needed a treasurer,” he said. That night, at dance club, he and his wife were assigned to a table with Kent and Cindy Barney. As they talked about Kearney Habitat, “Cindy, on her third question, said, ‘If you ever need someone to be treasurer...’”

“That was a Kingdom Moment,” McKenzie said. She began serving as treasurer in 1993, and moved to finance chair in 1996, a position she still holds today.

Other “Kingdom Moments” have come with the right gifts at the right time. A \$125,000 gift from the Louise Kellaway estate made it possible for Kearney Habitat to build a combination warehouse and office building, which was dedicated Jan. 24, 2002. “It (the warehouse) makes it possible for us to expand the start of the build season in a climate controlled setting,” McKenzie said. “The warehouse provides needed storage and work space, and the conference room gives us a place to meet.”

Until the Louise Kellaway gift, Kearney Habitat, which builds homes for others, was itself, in a sense, “homeless.”

The ongoing success of Kearney Habitat created a need for more land on which to build Habitat homes.

Methe said, “I know when I came back into leadership in 2007, we realized we needed land.”

A block grant made it possible to secure a number of lots between Avenue E and Avenue F, which helped for a time, but a major step forward took place in 2013, when Kearney Habitat purchased 9.5 acres near 17th Street

and Avenue M.

The purchase, the largest single acquisition of land in the 22-year history of the affiliate, was done with Habitat homeowner’s mortgage payments, and local and corporate sponsors. Homeowner mortgage payments go into a fund to finance future builds.

In a Kearney Hub interview, then Habitat president Brandon Benitz said, “Land availability has been at the top of our prayer list since the beginning of the affiliate. This is an overwhelming answer to many prayers over many years and will allow us to continue our ministry here in the Kearney area for many years to come.”

When asked what he sees as some of the important milestones for the organization, McKenzie noted the purchase of 9.5 acres for future Habitat homes and the years of Ken Mumm presidencies.

Mumm has served as president in 2001, 2002, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017. In addition, he chaired the Family Nurture Committee from 1997-2000 and was the UNK Habitat sponsor in 2000.”

“His presidencies and the people he has engaged have been very significant,” McKenzie said.

Looking back at the four founders, and their many contributions over the 25 years, Methe summed it up, describing each of the four:

McKenzie- *Vision*. He has great vision. He sees opportunities. There are so many people he can touch. And he has great leadership.

Ballou- *Connections*. He has great connections to churches and schools, and he gathers people together and dreams big.

Marlatt- *Tenacity*. He has the tenacity to move forward. He tread where many faint-hearted would not. He connected well with Millard Fuller and would often quote him.

Methe- *Believer*. I just believed in the mission. It is a brilliant idea. Truly God-inspired. There is real genius behind it. “If there were a lot of Kearney Nebraskas doing this, it could make a real difference in the world,” Methe concluded.

Until then, Kearney Habitat will continue making a world of difference in lives here in Kearney.

Interviews conducted by and author of article

– Glennis Nagel



Methe-Ballou-Marlatt-McKenzie

A Gift That Truly Keeps On Giving

The following story is a tribute to you the donors, volunteers, homeowners suppliers, committee members, lunch providers and so many more over these first 25 years of Kearney Area Habitat for Humanity (KAHfH).

While each of you has played a unique and valued role in the tremendous success of this ecumenical Christian housing ministry, we will focus on a single story to help us see the big picture. We will focus on an individual donor. Call her Mrs. F, that is "F" as in faithful. She has been donating \$1,000 each year for as long as we can remember, perhaps for all 25 years.

We believe Mrs. F did make her initial donation in 1992, our first year. That money purchased materials as volunteers by the hundreds came to build a home for and with a family in need. Because homeowners make monthly payments to KAHfH over the term of their mortgage, by now Mrs. F's 1992 donation of \$1,000 has been paid back bit-by-bit, month-by-month to help purchase materials for homes number two, three, four, five, six, seven, etc. Those homeowners have also been making their no interest monthly mortgage payments which again are recycled into the purchase of materials and lots for the next homes. By the way, Mrs. F donated \$1,000 in years two and three and four, up to and including this year, number 25! Each donation has had that wonderful repetitive impact!

By now you must be saying "Thank God for Mrs. F and her gifts that keep on giving!" But remember, for KAHfH to have built 76 homes it has taken a lot more than Mrs. F's \$1,000 each year. It took you and countless hundreds of people praying for all involved in this housing ministry!

It took you, the \$100 donor and the \$12,000 donor! It took you, the committee members and homeowners and volunteer laborers! It took you, the companies that donated supplies, time and knowledge. It took many, many amazing folks! We salute all involved! We thank God for the unique and special blessing you are!

Some of you will remember our first year, 1992, when volunteers built a single home for \$26,250 on a donated lot. Contrast that with this year and the \$238,000 it will take to build THREE simple, decent, affordable homes for and with God's people in need, still using volunteer labor. That money will come from two sources--\$106,000 from homeowner mortgage payments and \$132,000 in donated dollars. The donated dollars will come from individuals, churches, Carpenter's Club members, foundation grants and businesses. Our hope is to have that money in hand by Oct. 31 to cover costs as they occur during the construction season.

We are pleased to report there is real progress towards the \$132,000 amount! It is also quite exciting to report that home numbers 77 and 78 and 79 are already framed in on three of the lots we previously purchased!

By the grace of God and the work of hundreds and hundreds of volunteers, along with the generosity of Mrs. F and so many of you, we have had an amazing first 25 years! What role will you play as this miracle continues?

—*Jim McKenzie*, member KAHfH Board of Directors



Jim McKenzie with the sign for the first dedication on November 22, 1992



On the left, the first homeowner, Anna Rodriguez and her two girls. On the right are the three 2017 homeowners, featured in their own article on page 2.