

The House That Carter Built

A version of this article on former President Jimmy Carter appeared as the cover story of the April 1989 issue of Charisma magazine. We present this condensed version here in honor of the passing of the former president yesterday, Sunday, Dec. 29, 2024.

When former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn joined Habitat for Humanity in 1984, their hands-on participation transformed the organization's visibility. The Carters first worked on a New York City tenement restoration, an effort captured by national media and highlighting Habitat's mission: eliminating poverty housing globally.

Unlike most former presidents, Carter chose a path reflecting his unorthodox nature. Known for his faith-driven leadership, he brought the same fervor to Habitat, a Christian nonprofit dedicated to providing decent, affordable housing. This alignment with his values led him to embrace Habitat's vision, despite the relative obscurity of the organization at the time.

In Atlanta's impoverished Cabbagetown neighborhood, Carter worked alongside nearly 1,000 volunteers to build 20 houses as part of Habitat's International House-Raising Week. Once dominated by substandard housing and urban blight, the area was transformed into a vibrant community. Carter's presence, from framing walls to painting porches, embodied his belief in service and equality.

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The former president and first lady fully immersed themselves in the project. Staying in college dorms with other volunteers and sharing cafeteria meals, they broke barriers between roles and statuses. Each morning began with devotionals, reinforcing

Habitat's Christ-centered mission, which founder Millard Fuller passionately upheld despite pressures to secularize.

Carter's leadership extended beyond manual labor. He urged civic and religious leaders to contribute to Habitat's efforts, challenging Atlanta's churches to build one house annually. His advocacy drew attention to the staggering housing crisis: over five million Americans live in substandard conditions, with 1.4 million homeless.

For homeowners-to-be like Jackie Gray, a single mother in a wheelchair, Habitat's program was life-changing. Participants contribute "sweat equity," working on others' homes before earning their own. Habitat charges no interest, and mortgage payments fund future projects, rooted in the "Economics of Jesus."

Carter's commitment was evident in his tireless work ethic. One evening, after a full day's labor, he volunteered for extra hours to help finish a lagging project. Later, he joined Habitat supervisor Leroy Troyer to ensure Gray's wheelchair-accessible bathroom was perfect, even praying together during the task.

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Beyond the construction site, Carter's influence on Habitat's mission remains profound. Habitat's projects expanded to numerous U.S. cities and internationally, with the Carters participating annually in what became the Jimmy Carter Work Project. Their dedication was a heartfelt demonstration of their belief in using faith for tangible change.

Carter's association with Habitat wasn't an isolated act of charity but a continuation of a lifetime of service. His upbringing in a family that valued equity and his presidency shaped his compassion for marginalized communities. Through

Habitat, Carter leveraged his global influence to address poverty and housing, and the humanity and dignity of every person.

Fuller, a charismatic leader and visionary, described Habitat as “a movement of God’s love in action.” Carter repeatedly championed Habitat’s mission, exemplifying Christianity in practice—where faith meets action and transforms lives.

Today, Carter’s legacy with Habitat for Humanity is a testament to what can be achieved when compassion and determination converge. It’s not just about building houses but restoring hope, community and faith in shared responsibility.

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