

MAKING A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE IN OTHER PEOPLES LIVES

By Victoria M. Heilman, August 2007

On August 26, 2007, the Kilengawana, Moronda and Bwelakaya families of Korogwe achieved their lifetime dream of having a decent home. Mr. Kilengawana explained the improvements for his family as a result of their new house. *“Having a house in Korogwe will completely change my life. I will be able to ask for a bank loan using my house. This will give me capital to do other businesses like keeping farm animals and selling their products. This new house is a big boost for my family”.*



This great achievement was made possible with the help of a group of 20 Global Village volunteers from Northern Ireland who traveled to Korogwe, Tanzania to help construct houses through Habitat for Humanity Tanzania. Habitat is a Christian, non-profit, non-governmental, housing ministry that works in partnership with different people irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender or faith, to build and renovate houses for families in need. Habitat's goal is to strengthen communities by increasing the availability of descent and affordable shelter.

Interested communities or established groups in Tanzania can approach Habitat through their main office in Dar es Salaam where they are helped to organize themselves into self-help groups to raise funds and mobilize volunteer labour in their locality. The benefiting families are selected based on their need for housing, their ability to repay the loan, and their willingness to partner with Habitat. The beneficiary families usually contribute not only their sweat, for example in digging their pit latrine, but also they must supply materials such as perhaps for their house's foundation. In certain cases, Habitat then provide the remaining cost for a complete house covered in the form of a loan to the family. In more and more instances, Habitat is however choosing to work through the provision of smaller repeat loans, enabling a family to build a house in stages but far quicker than would be possible without access to the housing finance that Habitat provides. This helps to ensure that repayment levels are high. The repaid loans are then used to build more houses in the same community.

In addition to the volunteers from Northern Ireland, I was also given the opportunity to volunteer on the project, as Habitat was happy to add an architect to their team. I was given the chance to develop my leadership skills after being made the team leader for the technical aspects of the project. I advised the fundis (skilled labour) on construction issues, including the ratio for mixing cement, sand, and aggregate for concrete, making brick wall joints, and curing concrete procedures. I worked with the fundis to ensure that the Global Volunteer team was able to reach their daily targets.

The Northern Ireland Global Village volunteers were a fantastic group to be around. They were friendly, had a wonderful sense of humor, were respectful of each other, and worked well together as a team. Most were parents and their children. The work was hard, but it provided a good opportunity for parents to bond with their children. Given how well everyone got along, I was surprised to find out, only after returning to Dar es Salaam, that the Global Village volunteers had another motive other than helping needy families or taking a chance to bond with their children. Their group was specifically made up of Catholics and Protestants, two groups on opposite and antagonistic sides of a deeply divided Northern Ireland. It turns out that their trip was as much about building bridges across a polarized Northern Ireland sectarian divide as it was about building houses under the equatorial sun. I have no doubt that the Global Volunteers were as successful at building bridges between their communities as they were at building houses in Tanzania.



The work was demanding. Completing three houses in two weeks is a challenge. The three house owners got the project started on the right foot by having the foundations laid before we arrived. The families dug the foundation trench and filled it with stones, which are readily available in the area. This left our volunteer team to begin our work building walls using burnt bricks and sand cement mortar. After



obtaining a height of 2.7 meters, we poured concrete in laid down reinforcement bars to make a ring beam, which is essential to tie the building together before roofing with corrugated iron sheets. Construction techniques and building materials used in Habitat projects result in better, secure, decent and affordable houses in comparison to other houses in the area.

Being able to lend a helping hand to fellow Tanzanians was a gratifying experience. The families in Korogwe were living in thatch, mud, and pole houses and were worried during the heavy rains that their houses would be washed away.

Volunteering with Habitat was a great opportunity to participate in social justice work by working together with families in their efforts to provide themselves with descent shelters. People suffering under the burden of endemic poverty are out there in our rural communities and we don't have to wait for the government or outside donors to take action. It is high time we start building a culture of volunteerism in our everyday lives. Something very small, like volunteering one week, can lead to life changing benefits for someone else. If we start to think that we too can make a difference that our efforts can lead to an observable improvement for a family then the alleviation of poverty does not seem to be so far away that it can not be reached. After experiencing the living conditions of the people in rural Korogwe, it is rewarding to see what a difference I could make to someone else's life.

