

The Greater Gift

Jonathan was one of those amazing teenagers who appreciated everything that he had – most especially his family. He had two sisters and a hard-working mother. Being the only male in the home and living in an overcrowded home with not enough bedrooms, Jonathan was assigned to sleep on the floor or couch in the living room. Not complaining, he accepted his lot in life with a smile. The family managed to get by, and they always had each other to rely upon. Then...

Jonathan's mother, Sandy, applied to Habitat for Humanity of Lake County. The family was accepted into the program and began completing their volunteer hours. Two local churches came together and donated the funds needed to build the house. The churches also provided volunteers and enthusiasm! Habitat staff and volunteers became well acquainted with Sandra, Jonathan and his two teenage sisters. They eagerly participated in each phase of the build, and Jonathan was always there with a smile – charmingly pointing out which room would be "his".

Within weeks, the house was complete and it was time for the home to be dedicated. With volunteers, staff, and family members all in attendance there was much excitement in the air. Prayers were offered, gifts were presented, and hugs were aplenty. At one point during the celebration, Jonathan asked to speak to the group. He quietly began speaking about his mom and how hard she worked to simply keep them together with a roof over their heads. As he spoke, his voice became stronger and clearer. He wanted everyone to know how much he appreciated his family and how very grateful he was for this new home and his new bedroom room – something he had *never* had. Eyes filled with tears as this young man spoke. His sincerity filled the room, and we all felt the pureness of that moment.

Jonathan and his family moved into their new home, and they began their new life. Time went by, and things went very well for this family. About three years later, I looked up from my desk to see a young man dressed in his Marine uniform. He was handsome, dapper and smiling. After a short greeting, he said, "You have no idea who I am – do you?" I admitted that I could not recall who he was, to which he replied, "I'm Jonathan – Sandra's son!". I remembered his voice as began to speak, "I wanted to come back and tell you what a difference Habitat made in my life. I graduated from high school and could not afford to go to college. So I joined the Marines. They are going to help with my school. Now I am serving as a recruiter. I just wanted to come back and thank you for all you did for me. It is because of Habitat that I am where I am today."

We hugged and exchanged kind words as my heart filled with joy and pride. As he left my office, I realized that we are often not aware of the difference we make in the lives of others. The donors, volunteers and staff who worked alongside this family had made a profound difference! Lives were changed. And, if the truth be told – *every* life was changed.

As an affiliate it is easy to get caught up in budgets and policy. Sometimes we forget that in the end, it is all about families and individuals. Jonathan's life was changed by Habitat, and my life was forever changed by him. In my mind, I got the greater gift.