

HONORING THE WOMEN HOME BUILDERS OF HABITAT

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By Jim Phelps

Betsy Wagner has been helping to build houses with Nevada County Habitat for Humanity for over a decade. During her working career Betsy was in the medical field – she didn't have a background in construction or building. So, what prompted her and then kept her coming out to help build Habitat homes? "Ever since I was a little girl I loved tools," she says. "So now I get to use all kinds of tools! I've learned how to use a chop-saw and a nail gun. It's a lot of fun!"

Since its formation in 1996, Nevada County Habitat has been a place where women are not only welcome, but thrive. "What I love about Habitat is that it's truly a collaborative environment in which men and women from every walk of life can contribute in a meaningful way. Throughout our history women have made a deep impact on our work and in shaping the community Habitat affects," says Lorraine Larson, Habitat's Executive Director.

The construction trades are not typically identified as a field associated with women. In fact, according to the National Association of Women in Construction, just 1.5% of construction jobs were filled by women (2018). And just 9% of all contractors are women.

Habitat breaks that mold with over 20% of its core construction volunteers being women. "Habitat has been a place where women's natural leadership



C.J. and a Habitat volunteer work together to build a house.
Photo by Andy Wright.

qualities can fully bloom," says Larson, who has been with Nevada County Habitat for 13 years. "Whether it is homeowner selection, homeowner support, community outreach or serving on the Board, women have found a home with Habitat."

"I'm especially impressed with all the women who are a part of our construction team. We have retired nurses, high tech workers and homemakers who are part of the team. And our assistant construction

supervisor, C.J. Cavet, is an amazing carpenter. It's a great environment for women to make a difference for the entire community." And for other women.

To date, Nevada County Habitat has built 40 homes with local low-income homeowners, and is currently constructing three more homes in Grass Valley. Of those homeowners, 65% have a woman as the head of household. "In many ways, Habitat is a place where women have the opportunity to literally

build up other women," says Marilyn Hopkins, an early Board member who has remained associated with Nevada County Habitat for over two decades. "There are just so many ways to become involved."

And there's support. One of the things women can expect when joining the Habitat construction crew is an environment that emphasizes growth and learning, especially for volunteers that may have very little experience. C.J. Cavet says of the things she enjoys most is working with Habitat homeowners and volunteers. "I like teaching people. I enjoy passing along what I know to others."

Betsy is proud that Habitat has several other women on-site as regular volunteers, and she encourages other women to get involved. "If I can do this, other women can, too," she says. "I've done things I never thought I could do. We (as women) don't just have to sweep floors, bake cookies and do the laundry. We can help build homes for families, too!"

"The spirit of Habitat is contagious," says Hopkins. "It will change your life – and the lives of so many others."

For more information on Nevada County Habitat and how to make a difference, go to www.NCHabitat.org.

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