

A Humanitarian Act to Create Habitat

“There’s no place like home” is a meaningless phrase to over three million homeless people in the United States alone. Homelessness has become a serious problem all over the world. Out of compassion for the homeless and the poor, one couple from Alabama, Millard and Linda Fuller, has devoted their entire lives to building affordable housing all over the world. To me, a compassionate act is one that attempts to alleviate suffering out of a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for someone who is stricken by misfortune. Service to the community when self-interest is a major motivating factor is not a true compassionate act. For example, some celebrities give tiny amounts of their money to people in need for more publicity or to improve their image. The show “Extreme Home Makeover” improves housing for people in need, but is ultimately motivated by profit and television ratings. The work of Millard and Linda Fuller to start and sustain Habitat for Humanity is inspiring to me because they have alleviated the suffering of hundreds of thousands of homeless or low-income individuals in substandard housing. Their acts are truly selfless and express great compassion.

As young adults, Millard and Linda Fuller were unlikely candidates to start Habitat for Humanity, an organization that Bill Clinton called “the most successful continuous community service project in the history of the United States.” Millard Fuller graduated from University of Alabama Law School and began a successful marketing firm with a college friend. By age twenty-nine, he had become a thriving millionaire. But as his business and wealth grew, his marriage to Linda Fuller suffered. Millard and Linda Fuller decided to re-evaluate where their life was heading and make a better plan

for the future. Soon, they sold all of their possessions, donated their money to the poor, and moved to Koinonia Farm in Georgia, a community focused on practical ways to help others. At Koinonia Farm the couple developed a plan to help make homes more affordable to families with lower incomes. Volunteers, along with homeowner families, build modest houses at low cost by using donated money and materials. The homeowners purchase the homes at cost with affordable loans. In turn, mortgage payments are used to finance the building of more homes. In addition, the homeowners invest hundreds of hours of their own labor, referred to as “sweat equity,” in building their houses and the houses of others. This model was very successful in providing new families with homes while being able to continue to help others. To see if this model to build houses for the poor also worked in developing countries, the Fullers moved to Africa with their four children to build more houses; their house-building model was also successful there. In 1976, they returned to the United States and started Habitat for Humanity International. Since then, the organization has grown rapidly and has built more than 250,000 houses in 50 states and 90 countries, providing more than a million people with affordable shelter. Because of the initial and continued efforts of Millard and Linda Fuller, many youth and adults have contributed with compassion to this huge effort, while volunteering for Habitat for Humanity programs.

The problem of homelessness has always aroused compassion in me. Families with children are now the fastest growing group of the homeless population and account for 40% of the people who become homeless each year. Children and youth who are homeless suffer from poor access to health care and education, as well as from exposure to violence, substance abuse, and other criminal activity. Domestic abuse, withdrawal of

social assistance programs, marginalization of certain ethnic groups, mental illness, and the high cost of housing are contributing factors. The efforts of Habitat for Humanity around the world have helped many families that would either be homeless or in substandard housing, but there is still a lot of work to do. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements estimates that there are 100 million homeless people in the world and 600 million more that live in shelters that threaten their life or health.

I can visualize myself working in some way with homeless people for many years. Providing houses to the poor and homeless using the model the Fullers developed is a compassionate act that inspires me. Not only does it serve to relieve suffering, but it also builds self-pride and a sense of community through its program of participation in building, financing and “sweat equity.” This would be the way that I would address homelessness. In almost every job, it is possible to figure out some way to help the homeless. If I own a restaurant, I will not only serve free meals to the poor or homeless on certain days, but I will also try to invite them into my kitchen to help fix those meals and serve them to other homeless people. If I become an architect, I will design easy-to-build, relatively inexpensive but good quality houses, and I will follow the lead of Habitat for Humanity and ask that the homeowners help to build their own houses. Whatever field I choose, I believe that I will find a way to help the homeless in a way that also increases their self-respect.

Homelessness is a huge worldwide issue that is not going to go away easily or by a single individual’s actions. The creation of Habitat for Humanity International by Millard and Linda Fuller was an exemplary compassionate act, which to me made a bigger difference in housing for the poor than I could imagine two people could do. It

inspires me to be an advocate for the homeless now, and, in the future, to plan my career and community service to do what I can to alleviate this problem. One woman from Guyana who helped build her Habitat for Humanity house and now works for the organization claims that her struggle to provide sweat equity was well worth it. “If somebody could encourage me, and at the end of the encouragement I have achieved a home, then why can’t I do it to somebody else?” she says. “This is what life is all about. We all have to help somebody.”

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