For my experiential project, I chose to help build a Habitat for Humanity home. The activity took place in Minnetonka, MN, and lasted from 8 am until 4 pm. I chose this particular activity because I have been involved with Habitat for Humanity in the past, and I have always enjoyed it. This class presented another opportunity for me to get involved with Habitat for Humanity and my community.

When the other volunteers and I arrived at the home, limited information was available about the family that would be living in the home. Habitat for Humanity posted a one page information sheet on a door of the home, including a picture of the family and a brief paragraph about their history. In this family of five, the father immigrated to the US and worked to begin saving money for the rest of his family to join him. After 3 long years, his wife and kids also immigrated to Minnesota. Since that time, the family has a limited income, and has had some financial struggles. They applied for housing assistance from Habitat for Humanity, which is making it possible for the family to live in a reasonably priced home.

The individuals I served seem like they have worked hard to get where they are today. They will have to continue to work hard to maintain a mortgage payment, and keep up with the home in the future. The family went through a screening process to be chosen for a Habitat for Humanity home, which I can only assume is fair with regard to all the applicants. After a family in need applies for help with a local Habitat affiliate, the affiliate’s family selection committee chooses homeowners “based on their level of need, their willingness to become partners in the program and their ability to repay the loan. Every affiliate follows a nondiscriminatory policy of family selection. Neither race nor religion is a factor in choosing the families who receive Habitat houses.”
Much like the family, I have worked hard to get to where I am today, and I will continue to work hard in the future. I would also like to have three children. Additionally, the family is also actively involved in volunteering for Habitat for Humanity projects as I am. Unlike the family, I had the fortune of being born a US citizen, and I am able to afford housing for myself and my family.

The first time I participated in a Habitat for Humanity activity, I had some misconceptions on how the family selection process worked. I recognized that the organization functions with the help of volunteer labor and the donation of money and materials. They build, and sometimes fix up, relatively simple (often town home or brownstone style) homes with the help of volunteers and families that own Habitat homes. I incorrectly assumed that the homes built by Habitat for Humanity were given to the recipients (partner families). In reality, Habitat houses are sold to partner families at no profit and financed with affordable loans. The monthly mortgage payments are then used to build more Habitat homes.

The Habitat for Humanity organization states, “Habitat is not a giveaway program. In addition to a down payment and the monthly mortgage payments, homeowners invest hundreds of hours of their own labor—sweat equity—into building their Habitat house and the houses of others.” I think this makes donors and volunteers more likely to provide assistance to the organization. If a large possession such as a home is simply given to somebody else, there seems to be some resentment toward the recipient, to say, “I wish somebody would just give me a home.” In reality, the recipients of Habitat homes still have to provide a down payment and maintain a mortgage.
There are many myths that exist about the Habitat for Humanity organization. Examples of these include: “Habitat homes reduce a neighbor’s property value”, or “Habitat homeowners are on welfare.” However, the facts to counter these myths are shown on their website and in their literature. Habitat for Humanity seeks “to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness from the world and to make decent shelter a matter of conscience and action.” I have always had respect for the organization and thought that it existed for a good cause. Participating in homebuilding projects has not changed my perception of the organization.

In the future I would participate in other homebuilding projects on my own initiative, without being related to a class project. The company I work for frequently participates in activities identical to this. While it is not mandatory or even suggested that employees participate, it is an opportunity for employees to serve the community as well as network with other employees. Every time I have participated in the project in the past, it has felt like a social event in addition to work building a home. In the past I have helped to install trim, install drywall, paint homes, install siding, install insulation, and other activities. I enjoy learning about different aspects of homebuilding.

While participating in this activity, I was able to casually learn about the recipient family’s background without being intrusive. Habitat for Humanity makes a very limited amount of information available for volunteers, but nevertheless I do have some knowledge of the family. Additionally, I learned about my co-workers’ lives and the lives of other volunteers through casual conversation while we installed drywall.

Every time I have participated in this activity, the site coordinator sits down with the volunteers and explains a little about the organization and how it works, and answers
any questions people may have. In this particular exercise, I learned first hand what is involved in installing drywall. The first time I participated in building a Habitat for Humanity home, I learned a lot about the process the organization takes to choose a family and the process for the family to get into a home.

1 http://www.habitat.org/how/factsheet.aspx
2 http://www.habitat.org/how/myths.aspx