Experiential Activity – Habitat for Humanity Volunteer
The Activity

For my experiential activity, I chose to volunteer at a Habitat for Humanity build site. In high school and college, I worked on a construction crew that did everything from building houses to cutting down trees. I enjoyed my time on that crew, so I thought that by spending time at a Habitat for Humanity site I could give back to the community and have some fun. My time with the folks at Habitat for Humanity included numerous emails and phone calls to try to volunteer, a “mandatory” orientation for all volunteers, and then finally time at the build site.

Orientation consisted of meeting with the local Program Manager at the local Habitat for Humanity office. During that time, a waiver of liability was signed and my construction background was discussed. We also reviewed the history of Habitat for Humanity and the goal/mission of the organization. The Program Manager then described the family selection process to me. I then spent just a couple minutes with the construction manager of the site that I would be working at. We also briefly reviewed Habitat for Humanity safety policies.

The build site was newly dug. It was not much more than a hole in the ground. During my time with the Habitat for Humanity crew, we spent time digging out footings that had washed in during the week of rain that we had. We also laid some drainage tile that surrounded the house. The tile will be poured into the concrete footings and act as a water escape during wet periods. Most of my time was spent digging, however. Working with two other volunteers, we trenched out about 100’ of 30” wide footings.

I chose to volunteer at a Habitat for Humanity site because I wanted to give back to the community. I thought that it would a good way for me to get involved in community activities and partake in a task that I enjoyed. I hope this one event will inspire me to give back more of my time.
**The People**

I was hoping to meet the family of the house that was being built during my visit. I had asked if this would be possible during my orientation, but the Program Manager did not know. She informed me that each owner is required to put in 250 hours of “sweat equity”. This means that each new homeowner must work for 200 hours on their own home and 50 hours on a home built before theirs.

I was not lucky enough to meet the family, however. The construction manager of the build site had informed me that the new owner is a single mother of three children and could not find care for her children on that day. This made me wonder if she would be capable of completing her 200 hours of sweat equity. 200 hours is 25 – 8 hour days. I learned that each home takes approximately 6 months to finish, and the Habitat for Humanity construction crew works only 3 days a week (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday). This means that the new home owners only have about 72 – 8 hour days to get their sweat equity completed. To me, there would be nothing better to bring a family close together than to spend some time at their new house. I am sure the kids would love playing in their new yard.

I did get to learn about the family through the other volunteers. They informed me that she is a hard working mother. She has had some tough times in life and is unable to provide adequate living conditions for her children at her income level. They did not know much about her though times, and I felt reluctant to ask as I did not want to invade privacy.

Since I did not get to meet the homeowners, I talked a lot with the other volunteers about why they spent their Saturday’s with the crew. Three others were first-timers like myself, and three more were experienced crew members. One of the first time volunteers was a retired
software engineer and was looking for a way to spend her time. She spent time volunteering with several non-profit organizations around Rochester. The other first-timer was a younger man who was pretty quite. He did not say why he was there, but did say he was an assembler at a local manufacturer.

I also spent some time talking with the home designer and lead at the construction site. He is a retired Electrical Engineer. When asked how he got involved, he said that during his time with IBM, he volunteered during “Give Back” days. He greatly enjoyed his time and experience, and when retired, was looking for something to do but did not want “another career”. He decided to volunteer all 3 days each week that the Habitat for Humanity crew worked. When the local Habitat for Humanity crew was searching for a volunteer designer, this gentleman stepped up and took the reins. He was pretty proud of all of his achievements during his time with Habitat for Humanity.

**Justice, Equity and Fairness**

Because I did not get to spend any time with the recipient family of this home, it is hard to comment on the fairness as compared to my situation. I do not know the single mother’s past, if she was in a committed relationship to the children’s father, or how she fell amongst such tough times. I was, however, disappointed that she was not at the build site, however.

I am believer that while we cannot control some things in life, there are many things that we can control. In this day and age we can, no matter the situation, control how hard we work, where we work, and the education level we have. We can also control how many children we have, what we do with our spare time, and how we behave. I have to believe, because of the strict selection process that Habitat for Humanity uses, that the mother of the family is hard working, is working hard at a good employer, and has or is getting a solid education. Because I
believe this, I feel that everything is fair and equal. Because of events out of her control, her family has fallen upon hard times. I feel proud for giving back some of my time to help out this family.

The Organization

Going into the volunteer day with Habitat for Humanity, I had several misconceptions. I first thought that Habitat for Humanity provided free housing to people with no income. I also thought that they selected families that had drug and chemical dependencies or other problems. These couldn’t be further from the truth.

Habitat for Humanity has a very stringent, three step selection process. First, the family must meet financial requirements. No family below the poverty line will be considered. Only families at or slightly above the poverty line are eligible for a home. Second, the family must be willing and able to put in 250 hours of sweat equity. This means they must volunteer for 50 hours at a home BEFORE they are selected and 200 hours on their own home. Last, the local selection committee evaluates the “need” of the family. They conduct in-home interviews with the family evaluating current living conditions and family values. They then select the best fit family.

These selection criteria impressed me. It appeared as if no family with current drug and chemical abuse problems were selected. It also made me more willing to volunteer when I found out that all new homeowners were required to pay an interest free mortgage payment to Habitat for Humanity. All materials and required services (electrical, plumbing, etc) were paid by the homeowner through this mortgage. My labor would help this family get back on stable ground.

This experience made me drastically change my view of Habitat for Humanity as an organization and the owners of a Habitat for Humanity home. I had a perception that owners of
Habitat for Humanity homes were people who were looking for a “free pass” in life. This is not the type of people that Habitat for Humanity aims to serve. The real market for Habitat for Humanity is people who have had misfortune at some point in their life and need some help to get some stability. My viewpoint of the organization being one of seeking anything free also changed. While Habitat for Humanity would like any able person to help, they realize that some tasks require professionals. They also were very organized and had a goal to complete before the day was over. Because labor resources (volunteers) are so unpredictable, Program Managers could not develop precise timelines, but rough project milestones were documented. This organization impressed me.

I would volunteer with Habitat for Humanity again. I hope to take a family member with me sometime. I believe that this organization is out for the betterment of society. I can donate my time, even if it is one day per year, doing something to help the community improve. I would enjoy the time even more if I could “pound some nails” or do some more construction related projects.

I did find it somewhat difficult to learn about the families past without being intrusive. While I meant no harm, I did want to know what led the family to get where they were. We all have hard times in, but it is how we respond that defines us. I really wanted to know how the family fell upon such hard times and why there were not able to recover. I felt “nosy” when asking these questions, especially to the Program Manager and Construction Manager. I think it would have been even more difficult to ask the family as they clearly want to move on from the past rather than reflect on it.

**Summary**
I enjoyed my time with Habitat for Humanity. All of my assumptions of Habitat for Humanity were proven wrong. It is a very well ran organization trying to help good, hardworking people. If, or maybe more likely when, I fall upon some difficulty in life, I now know there are organizations out there that I can rely on. I also understand how fortunate I am to be in the position that I am in. I have been blessed with many things, and am going to work hard to keep them. I hope that the family of the new house is willing to work hard to continue to improve their situation.

This experience also taught me the value of donating some of the resources I have. Giving my time is a very simple thing that I can do to help people who have been struck by some bad luck. I can only hope that when I fall upon some hard times, these people are there to pick me up and help me out.