

Kara Werner overseeing Habitat's rise from ashes

Chuck Carlson, [Battle Creek Enquirer](#) 3:08 p.m. EDT July 15, 2015



(Photo: Al Lassen/For the Enquirer)

65CONNECT 2TWEETLINKEDIN 1COMMENTEMAILMORE

For Kara Werner, watching the Battle Creek Area Habitat for Humanity rise from the ashes is something more than a tired cliché.

The organization's new executive director remembers well the long, tough days after the November 2012 fire that destroyed Habitat's main office and popular used-clothes, appliances and home goods shop called the ReStore at its long-time location at 551 W. Michigan Ave.

"A fire like that is devastating and you don't realize what you have to go through," said Werner, who was a part-time volunteer coordinator at the time. "That's difficult for a strong for-profit company to deal with so it was even more difficult for a nonprofit because most don't have a lot of cash on hand. The organization took a very big hit financially that we're still trying to recover from."

She pauses.

“But we never took a hit building homes,” she continued. “The fire was on a Sunday and on Tuesday we were back on the building site.”

And so the rise from those ashes, quite literally, continues.

For a month or so after the fire, Habitat personnel shared a cramped space in the basement of the United Way before moving to the top floor of a former grocery store at 5700 Beckley Road, where the ReStore relocated to the main floor.

Now the ReStore is situated at 595 North Ave. and the office personnel has found a home at 286 Capital Ave. N.E., in a massive, 100-year-old building that was donated last year by the former tenants, the Woman’s League of Battle Creek.

“I’ve worked for Habitat two-and-a-half years and I’ve moved this place three times,” Family Services Coordinator Brenda Jones said with a laugh.

But, from the ashes, Habitat for Humanity has found a home.

“I think we’re starting to feel physically settled in,” Werner said of the move last September. “We’re settling in to what works for us.”

And with that new home comes a sense of stability that Werner has helped provide.

Formerly a project manager for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Werner was caught up in a layoff in 2009, eventually taking a spot on the Habitat board of directors.

After her initial part-time work with the nonprofit, she was named full-time administrative and volunteer manager and then last July was named interim and then acting director, replacing Joe Konrad, who moved back to Wisconsin with his family.

“Don’t ask me the difference between interim and acting,” she said with a smile.

After a long search for a permanent director, the Habitat decided the best candidate was already there and on July 5 Werner was named executive director.

“I think they’d be hard-pressed to find someone with the passion for the organization that I have,” she said. “There are a lot of people in this community who need safe, decent, affordable housing.”

Werner’s knowledge of the organization was key to helping it weather the storm of the constant changes.

“She’s very informative about Habitat’s rules and policies and it made the transition easier,” Jones said. “Stability, that’s the word that’s used all the time and we’re thankful we’ve got it.”

Created in 1989, the local Habitat for Humanity followed the national example by using volunteers to build homes for needy families willing to put in the work necessary.

But around 2006, the branch moved away from building new homes and focused on renovating and rehabbing houses already built, some of which required major renovations from roofs to basements.

Werner said that direction would be more cost-efficient and could help resurrect established neighborhoods.

Currently, Habitat holds 66 mortgages on rehabbed homes that new families are living in. Another home is expected to be dedicated in the next week and a new project starts right after that.

Werner said there is a core volunteer group of 10 to 15 people, most of whom are retired, that helps build homes. She said over the course of a year, some 600 people volunteer.

“We could not do what we do without them,” she said.

Over the past 25 years, it has built or rehabilitated 110 homes throughout Calhoun County and completed more than 25 critical home repairs (roofing and siding), and installed 40 wheelchair ramps, a new direction for Habitat.

“We have increased the number of families served by adding this critical service program,” Werner said.

For Werner and the new Habitat, the goals remain the same. And with a turbulent past behind them, she hopes the road ahead will be a lot smoother.

“The focus is to get ourselves financially stable and in a position to be able to grow,” she said. “We’re trying to get ourselves solid.”

Contact Chuck Carlson at 269-966-0690 or email him at ccarlson@battlecreekenquirer.com. Follow him on Twitter: @ChuckCarlson4