



Changing Lives

One Bowl of Soup at a Time

BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

Habitat for Humanity of Greater Jonesboro has been building homes and changing lives for those in the city who need it most since 1992. This year, the in-person return of the nonprofit organization's signature fundraiser, Souper Sunday, promises to serve up homemade soups from 18 area restaurants while raising money to help more local families be able to afford housing.

"We are truly here to build homes, communities and hope," said Executive Director Micheal Sullivan, who has been Habitat for Humanity of Greater Jonesboro (Habitat) for nine years. "We do that through two programs – home ownership and home repair. ... Everything we do is to bring people together to build houses and repair them and make sure everyone has a decent place to live."

Sullivan, who is originally from Doniphan, Mo., first moved to Jonesboro to attend Arkansas State University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in business management and a minor in entrepreneurship. He has since completed his master's degree in public administration with an emphasis in nonprofit management. Sullivan is former chair of the Jonesboro Chamber of Commerce Community Benefits Organization Committee, is a founding board member of the Homeless Resource Center HUB and currently serves on the mayor's Homeless Taskforce. As an active Jonesboro Young Professional Network member, he serves on its board as president elect and was community service chair in both 2021 and 2022. In 2019, Sullivan was recognized as one of the top three nonprofit executives in Arkansas by *Arkansas Business* magazine.



Micheal Sullivan, Julie Matthews, Laura Shelton and David Hunter

The executive director's passion for giving back is reflected in the growing impact Habitat has been able to make on the Jonesboro community in recent years. In the past year alone, Habitat has finished 10 homes. Two homes on Belt Street, which were sponsored by Jonesboro University Rotary Club, now house seven individuals, including five children. Eight of the homes finished were part of the Build Up for Phillip campaign, which finished a nine-home project that included a community park; 31 individuals, 20 of whom are children, now live in those eight homes.

"Now we are focused on being able to do more construction next year; we need to write grants and secure land," said Sullivan. "In the meantime, we have a repair program. It used to only include minor exterior repair, but we have applied for a grant to do aging in place to allow those over the age of 60 to stay in their homes for longer, which includes critical home repair. We widen doorways, make no-step entries and things like that – so mature residents can stay in their own homes as long as they can."

The nonprofit is also focused on growing ReStore, a nonprofit home improvement store and donation center that sells gently used items to the public. All proceeds from the store, located at 3610 E. Highland Drive, go to help build Habitat for Humanity homes.

"It's such a unique treasure," said Sullivan. "You never know what you're going to find – ReStore has home décor, furniture and rugs, and even windows and doors. The community can support us by donating, shopping and volunteering at ReStore."

"All the money gets divided within our programs – either new construction or repair. The more money we have, the more repairs

we are able to do. We currently have funding for three repairs, and we would like to do more. Habitat is still looking for more applicants, too; applications are online, or give us a call."

Sullivan works closely with his dedicated board of directors, which includes President David Hunter, Treasurer Michael Fasulo, Secretary Cheryl Knight, Laura Shelton, Mark Zimmer, John Travis, Dana Moore, Lida Guinn, Brian Templeton, Julie Matthews, Pedro Ramirez, Darrious Duffin and Darlene Nicks.

Hunter has served as board president since 2016 and began volunteering with Habitat several years before that. He says the impact the organization has on the lives of the families it helps is life changing.

"While going on home visits during the final selection process of families, it's hard to see the conditions some families in our area have to live in," said Hunter, an executive broker with Century 21 Portfolio. "Watching a family move into a home when they may have only dreamed of living in their own home is a wonderful feeling. Taking time to help with the process is a very rewarding feeling."

"I think if more people could get involved, they would understand the process. I think people misunderstand the process and feel that these families are just given the home, but that is not the process; they have to learn to maintain the home and learn to prioritize their spending in order to make their monthly mortgage payment. It's a learning process for these families, but maybe in the long run it will create a new generation that understands what it's like to live in their own home."

Board member Matthews, the financial center manager at



Simmons Bank in Paragould, is chairing the 12th annual Souper Sunday, which returns after being cancelled in 2020 and turned into a pick-up only event in 2021 due to COVID-19 concerns.

“I believe it is very important for the community to work together to change the lives of its residents,” she said. “If we can change the life of a family by providing shelter and stability, it will change the path for that one family for generations. Providing homes to families can break the cycle of poverty, which will have a positive impact on the community.”

The 2022 Souper Sunday chair says she enjoyed planning the event because she got to work together with many other volunteers who share a similar passion for bettering the community and for what Habitat stands for.

“I encourage everyone to come so they can be a part of changing lives in the community,” said Matthews. “We wouldn’t be able to build affordable homes if it weren’t for the support of our

community. It’s also a chance to taste some great soups.”

Souper Sunday, which will be held Nov. 6 at Embassy Suites by Hilton Red Wolf Convention Center, will offer up homemade soup from 18 local restaurants. Attendees will vote for their favorite soup; the winning business will go home with the ladle trophy, an honor currently held by Native Brew Works. Homemade desserts will be served, and there will be a large silent auction, as well.

Fellow board member Shelton, a branch manager at Supreme Lending, first got involved with Habitat in 2014 and has used her career experience to help the nonprofit organization.

“My occupation is centered around homeownership,” she said. “Just because a family’s financial situation doesn’t fit a standard box doesn’t mean that they don’t deserve some help. Habitat is not about handouts, it’s about relationships, stewardship and education. Habitat’s homeowners contribute their own time, as well

as that of family and friends. It’s not a handout, but a hand up.”

She hopes the community will show up to support Habitat’s popular annual event and learn more about the nonprofit organization.

“It’s really fun to see first timers come in and be overwhelmed at the choices,” said Shelton of Souper Sunday. “It is also fun to see some of the same people each year, like a small reunion of sorts. It’s a very physical day for most of the volunteers, but it is worth it knowing we are helping put families in homes. And the soups are always amazing.”

Participating restaurants include Honey Baked Ham, Longhorn Steakhouse, The Truck Patch, Red Lobster, Recovery Room Coffee & Bistro, 501 Steakhouse, Outback Steakhouse, The Edge Coffee Shop, TaMolly’s of Jonesboro, Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Schlottzsky’s, Colton’s Steak House & Grill, The Parsonage, Native Brew Works, Texas Roadhouse, Embassy Suites, Houlihan’s and Skinny J’s of Jonesboro.

“Affordable housing is one that is normally looked over,” said Sullivan of why the community should stop by on Nov. 6. “Shelter is a basic need, but how to get that shelter is not always thought about. Habitat is here to make sure there is a resource for the community, for families that may not qualify for a bank loan; we can offer them a lending opportunity that will open doors for them and make a long-term impact. What Habitat does is life changing for the family and their kids and generations to come.”

For more information about Habitat for Humanity of Greater Jonesboro, located at 520 West Monroe Ave., visit jonesborohabitat.com or follow Habitat for Humanity of Greater Jonesboro on social media. To purchase \$15 tickets to Souper Sunday, which will take place on Nov. 6 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Embassy Suites by Hilton Red Wolf Convention Center, visit jonesborohabitat.com/soupersunday or call (870) 203-9898.