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 WEDNESDAY, FEB. 28, 6:30PM

See **page 8**
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Greater Springfield
Habitat
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NEWS

February
 2025



Photo credit: Marie Ciosek
 From left: Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity marketing interns Yandel Alameda, Dakota Wirf, and Nate Shlosser are recognized at the recent Building Dreams fundraiser in Longmeadow.

Teen interns inspire awe, raise funds for GSHFH

As the saying goes, "what a difference a year makes."

In early December 2023, two 14-year-old boys from a local alternative school came to Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) for a marketing internship. Over the course of 12 months,

fueled by initial success, they continue to inspire awe and tackle monumental tasks for the benefit of the nonprofit organization. Most recently, the interns conceptualized and created "Bean Boutique," an iced coffee shop in their school

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Habitat Home School accepting students for free online program

School is now in session. That's right, Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity's (GSHFH) newest virtual program "Habitat Home School" will kick off its inaugural class this afternoon at 5pm. (Feb. 18 at 5pm for Spanish speakers.)

Habitat Home School is a monthly interactive online class that teaches its participants how to become financially ready to apply for GSHFH's homeownership program. There is no cost to attend, but registrations are required. To sign up for the [English class](https://bit.ly/40CmjRS), visit: bit.ly/40CmjRS. For the [Spanish class](https://bit.ly/4avadNC), register here: bit.ly/4avadNC

"I would like this series to be a pre-application course so people are more prepared from the financial review aspect of the application process," said Olga Callirgos, GSHFH Homeowner Programs coordinator and the creator of this project. "It's not mandatory, but highly recommended as it's a positive stepping stone for anyone interested in homeownership and it's

definitely a good idea to attend all of them so there is no missed information."

“It's a positive stepping stone for anyone interested in homeownership.”

- Olga Callirgos, Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity Homeowner and Programs coordinator

Each Habitat Home School session will offer a class in English and Spanish, last one to two hours and tackle a different topic each month. The first subject is "Building Strong Credit." Attendees should expect to participate in engaging activities and ask questions.

The courses will be taught by Operation HOPE representatives. Operation HOPE is a nonprofit that offers

financial literacy, coaching, and advocacy for low and moderate-income individuals and communities.

"Operation HOPE's involvement with Habitat for Humanity is rooted in our shared vision of creating a world where everyone has the chance to thrive," said Victor Encarnacion of Operation HOPE. "While Habitat provides safe and affordable homes, our partnership extends that mission by helping families achieve financial independence and sustainability, ensuring they have the financial literacy to maintain and protect their homes for years to come."

Upcoming classes will be advertised via social media, GSHFH website, and newsletters.

Habitat in your neighborhood

Habitat is a win for children of homeowners

Children perform better in school, see mental health improve

Juan and his wife Sandra said they clearly remember the day they walked over the threshold of their newly-purchased Springfield home. For them, and the many other families who are positively impacted by Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH), it was a turning point.

"When we first opened the door, the girls rolled across the carpets with impeccable smiles," said Juan. "Then, Saily ran to choose her room and Melanie kept going up and down the stairs in different ways."

That was 14 years ago. Today, Saily is a 25-year-old paramedic whose goal is to become a flight medic. Melanie, 20, is a sophomore at Westfield State University studying criminal justice.

Juan and Sandra said they realize the girls' achievements may not have been possible without Greater Springfield Habitat. Before purchasing the three-bedroom colonial in the city's Upper Hill neighborhood, the family lived in an uncomfortable apartment with many limitations, such as a play area for the girls. As much as Juan and Sandra tried to meet



Photo credit: Juan and Sandra
Saily (top left) and her younger sister Melanie lay on the carpet of their new Springfield home, which their parents Juan and Sandra purchased from Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity in January 2011.

their emotional needs by giving the girls attention, care, and the love they needed, the girls still struggled. Particularly with their self-esteem, and feelings of stability and security.

That changed when the family moved into their new home.

"The girls looked more excited and happier. They could

enjoy a good backyard and each had their own personal space to study; this was very meaningful to them. They also began to enjoy time with friends and this helped them a lot in their social lives," Juan said. "I think that the Habitat



Photo credit: Juan and Sandra
Melanie (left) and her older sister Saily pose outside their parents Springfield home.



Photo credit: Marielis
Angelis poses in the family's kitchen in Springfield's North End before school.

me because it gave me an opportunity to grow, provide, and establish a home for my kids," she said. "Before I became a homeowner, I lived in a two-bedroom apartment without a backyard. My kids were not happy."

Now is a different story. Marielis said her children have a backyard to play in and their own rooms. When the family moved in, Angelis, who was 7, said she played with her Barbies in her room and with her friends, she made "snow" angels on the plush living room area rug. She wanted to become an oncologist and cure cancer. Now at 12, her career aspirations remain the same. Her 7-year-old brother, Castiel, wants to become a cop.

"If it wasn't for Habitat, I would still live in an apartment and my kids probably would still be uncomfortable," Marielis said.

“
The Habitat for Humanity program has been a very important basis in the growth and stability of our daughters.
- Juan, homeowner

It should be of no surprise that children growing up in stable homes are likely to perform better in schools. In fact, according to a Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI) brief published in September 2024, children

growing up in poor-quality housing experience are more likely to experience symptoms

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of depression, anxiety, and aggression from elementary school through young adulthood when compared with children in higher-quality housing.

Furthermore, homeownership leads to better test scores and higher rates of high school graduation and college attendance, especially among children of low-income homeowners. HFHI research shows stable households are crucial for child development, with children of low-income homeowners being 11% more likely to graduate high school and 4.5% more likely to pursue higher education than their peers in rental housing, according to an HFHI Evidence Brief published in November 2020.

Johnniel just might embody the HFHI research. When he was 15 years old, his parents purchased a Greater Springfield Habitat bungalow in the Forest Park neighborhood of Springfield.

Prior to his parents buying the Habitat house, Johnniel said he remembers growing up in rough Springfield neighborhoods. But, his parents were determined to keep Johnniel and his siblings safe in a stable and loving environment. Johnniel said his parents signed him up for sports and he played year-round baseball or basketball.

After his parents were selected for the Habitat house, Johnniel helped them with completing the required sweat equity hours. He also



Photo credit: Marielis
Castiel smiles as he stands beneath balloons and a sign celebrating 100 days of school.

assisted his aunt and a family friend with the sweat equity hours for their Habitat houses. He enjoyed the work and studied it at Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technology High School, before it became an academy. Upon graduation, Johnniel worked in the carpentry trade, but at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, he switched gears and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering. These days, Johnniel is in his early 30s and is a project manager at Palmer Paving Group in Springfield.

"I think living in a Habitat house inspired me to keep pushing forward," he said. "If my parents can put in the time and effort to finally own a house of their own, I can achieve the goals I have as well."



Volunteers wanted
bit.ly/45NRkTM

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that raises funds for Greater Springfield Habitat.

“When Nathan was presented with the opportunity to start this internship program, I knew this was going to play another pivotal role in his growth and help him prepare for his future adult working life,” said Diane Moore, intern Nate Shlosser’s mother. “I see a confidence growing in him. His ideas and work in the community are building that confidence and helping him grow into the young man I know he can be.”

When the two freshmen arrived at the West Springfield administrative office conference room for the first time, their demeanors could not have been more different. Nate sat quiet with his head down. He swiveled from side to side in an office chair with wheels, barely speaking two words, let alone a full sentence. His counterpart, Dakota Wirf, rapidly fired questions, said Brandy O’Brien, GSHFH Marketing and Communications manager.

On this day, they learned their purpose was to help Greater Springfield Habitat plan and execute its first-ever county-wide read-a-thon fundraiser. It would be no small feat, even for the full-time staff. But first, the new interns needed to learn the purpose and mission of the affiliate, and about the affordable housing crisis. Secondly, the boys needed a firm grasp on marketing and branding concepts, a notion completely foreign to them.



Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) marketing interns Nate Shlosser (left) and Yandel Alameda stand behind a chalkboard that promotes “Bean Boutique,” their iced coffee shop, which raises funds for GSHFH.

With guidance and instruction from Brandy and Springdale Education Center (SEC) young adult teacher Trina Winans, the boys researched possible read-a-thon participants and donors, and their correlating contact information. They wrote solicitation letters to local and nationally-known celebrities. One letter caught the attention of Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll, who returned a video endorsement for the project. The video was later shared on Habitat’s social media channels and website. The boys created social media posts and branded messages,

plus flyers promoting the event. They distributed the flyers to local businesses. They co-wrote a feature article and photographed pictures to run with the story that was published in the Habitat newsletter and Turley publications. They practiced interviewing skills by speaking with staff, local politicians, and Habitat supporters about the read-a-thon. Furthermore, they raised awareness for the affiliate’s mission by recruiting social media followers.

Upon completion of the read-a-thon, they budgeted, planned, and shopped for a party celebrating the success of the event.

“They have become more confident through this experience,” said Jill Brewer, SEC director. “They were able to overcome challenges and develop a stronger belief in their abilities and their ability to work as a team.”

Fred Adams, SEC case manager who works with Dakota, agreed.

“When I heard about the internship for Dakota, I thought it would be a great idea to improve his engagement with school and outlook for his future,” Fred said. “Dakota needed to be invested in school and this project helped him become more engaged and improved his self-esteem.”

At the read-a-thon party,

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Dakota proposed a new fundraising project to benefit Greater Springfield Habitat and presented it to Jill. He suggested their school open an iced coffee stand that sells the beverage to teachers and administrators. Proceeds would go to GSHFH.

“There was a sense of pride as the director listening to his proposal,” Jill said. “It showed what a positive impact Habitat had on him and his eagerness to give back.”

Following the pitch, the boys, with new intern Yandel Alameda, returned to Habitat to flesh out their novel idea.

They created the name “Bean Boutique” and a marketing guide, including logo, branding colors and fonts, and a plan to get the word out. They designed flyers to be distributed in the school, drafted morning announcement messages to be read over the intercom, budgeted and shopped for supplies, and applied for a grant to help cover costs. Bean Boutique opened just before Christmas, and raised hundreds of dollars for Greater Springfield Habitat.

“This program continues to exceed my expectations,” Jill said. “This opportunity provides our students with a chance to work together on projects to achieve a shared goal. It provides them with real-life experiences focusing on experiential learning, problem-solving skills, and motivation.”

Diane agreed.

“Nathan has been given the opportunity to have his hands in so many different opportunities

provided by Habitat for Humanity. He’s gaining knowledge in many different facets of life, including the real world of hard work and responsibilities of having a career started. He is growing socially, emotionally, and academically. Habitat for Humanity will forever be a blessing that changed the trajectory of Nathan’s life,” she said. “My favorite thing right now to see from Nathan is his excitement in creating and developing Bean Boutique. He is always eager to share his thoughts and ideas about that

are centered around this project.”

Just before Bean Boutique began serving its patrons, all three interns were invited to participate in GSHFH’s “Building Dreams” fundraiser in early November 2024. They were introduced at the event to show Habitat’s impact in the community beyond construction. Donning tailored suits and new shoes,



Bean Boutique logo created by Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity marketing interns prior to launching their own business, which raises funds for the nonprofit.

“Habitat for Humanity will forever be a blessing that changed the trajectory of Nathan’s life.”
- Diane Moore, mother of marketing intern Nate Shlosser

they stood tall and listened as Executive Director Aimee Giroux spoke about their projects and achievements. When finished, Aimee offered the young men the opportunity to talk. Each one thanked Habitat for the opportunity.

“Yandel wore that suit in school the day he received it, walking the hallways and telling anyone who listened that he was going to a banquet for his internship,” said Tina Peloquin, SEC clinician who works with Yandel. “Leading up to that night, Yandel was not going to speak, which was his decision ... then Yandel grabbed the microphone to speak to the audience. He was calm, composed, and it seemed like he had rehearsed what

he wanted to say. He meant what he said at that banquet, he is very appreciative of the opportunity for the internship.

“I could not have been prouder of this young adult who has struggled to attend school, struggles with peer and staff relationships, struggles with staying motivated, and struggles with outside environmental issues,” Tina said.

OPEN HOUSE

EAST FOREST PARK LIBRARY, 136 SURREY ROAD, SPRINGFIELD

WEDNESDAY, FEB. 19: 5:30PM



Join us for an inspiring and interactive Open House hosted by Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity! Whether you're curious about our mission, eager to get involved, or just want to learn more about how we build stronger communities, this is the perfect opportunity.

What to Expect:

- **Discover Our Mission:** Learn how we provide affordable housing solutions and strengthen our local community, one family at a time.
- **Meet Our Team:** Get to know the passionate staff, board, and volunteers who bring our projects to life.
- **Interactive Displays:** Explore exhibits

showcasing our work, including photos and success stories of our housing projects.

- **Volunteer Opportunities:** Find out how you can lend a hand—whether it's on a build site or behind the scenes.
- **Q&A Session:** Have your questions answered by local Habitat experts.
- **Light Refreshments:** Enjoy complimentary snacks and beverages while mingling with fellow community members.

Why Attend?

Discover how you can make a difference. Whether you want to swing a hammer, donate, or simply spread the word, there's a place for everyone in our Habitat family.

Reserve your spot today:

bit.ly/4jwNo0i