

A HABITAT *ReSTORE* STORY

It was a typical Wednesday at the Boise Valley Habitat for Humanity *ReStore*, typical because it was full of surprises! The day began with a customer who had bought a home that had been in foreclosure, a house in need of much repair and “cosmetic improvement”. Corrine, the new homeowner, bought interior and exterior doors, sinks, toilets, bathtubs, light fixtures, and more. She opted to pay to have the ReStore deliver her purchases. A contractor had given Corrine an estimate of \$15,000 to get her house into shape, and she was delighted by the cost savings she was getting by buying at the ReStore. She spent over \$800 and I thanked her for contributing to a terrific sales day for the ReStore. We agreed that her purchase was a win-win proposition: she got high quality goods at deeply discounted prices; items once destined for the landfill would be put to good use; and the money she spent would help assure that another family in Ada County will achieve the dream of home ownership.

Later in the day, a semi arrived at the ReStore with a load of sheet rock, 150 4 x 8 sheets that were supposed to be sent to the landfill. An employee of a mobile home manufacturer had persuaded the business owner to donate the sheetrock to the ReStore. The material had to be unloaded by hand, and at that point in the day only a few volunteers were on duty at the store—all of them women. Undaunted, our volunteers unloaded the truck and then celebrated our receiving a generous gift as well as getting a great workout without going to the gym.

Habitat for Humanity ReStores have their origins in the generosity of the communities where we work. Affiliates often receive gifts of good quality building materials that, for a variety of reasons, cannot be used in Habitat homes. The ReStore concept was, and is a helpful solution to the problem of such materials ending up in landfills, helpful in making productive use of such things, and extremely helpful in providing an important revenue source to Habitat affiliates.

Like all good ideas, ReStores have taken on lives of their own. Retailers, wholesalers, contractors, trades people, and homeowners have embraced donating to Habitat ReStores as an alternative to long-term storage or disposal to landfills of home improvement products and building materials they no longer need. ReStore customers run the gamut from low-income homeowners to rental property owners, handymen and women, to builders and craftspeople, and a growing cadre of people who choose to “buy recycled” for environmental or ethical reasons. Many of our customers are “regulars” who always check with us before buying retail and who depend on us for good values. Even better, they have become friends who return for the great service our volunteers give and the congenial, upbeat atmosphere of the ReStore.

Each ReStore operates a bit differently, according to the needs, resources, and preferences of the local affiliate. The Boise Valley Affiliate’s ReStore has elected to focus on building materials and home improvement products; other ReStores also accept and sell a variety of other kinds of items donated. We do not purchase merchandise, although in rare cases we do buy parts to repair newer appliances. We receive most donations at the store, but two days a week take one or both of our vehicles (a fourteen foot box van and a full-size pickup truck) to pick up items from donors who cannot transport them on their own. Since opening our doors in April 2008, donation levels have escalated—at this point we average about fifteen donations a day. Since opening we have more than doubled our sales space, to approximately 14,000 square feet. Our store is in a busy retail area of Boise, in a space that was originally a grocery store in a strip mall.

As with all aspects of Habitat for Humanity, volunteers make operation of the ReStore possible. There are just two full-time employees at our store and we are open nine hours a day, six days a week. Each week, between *40 and 50 individuals* volunteer at the store, for a total of more than 300 hours of work. Volunteers help in a wide variety of way—some with unique skills and some with no special skills. Volunteers include retired, working, and unemployed individuals who commit to specific days and times every week. Other volunteers work on a drop in basis. In addition, we cooperate with local courts who assign individuals with mandatory community service to work at the ReStore. We participate in a number of programs which place individuals with disabilities in volunteer settings where they can gain valuable work experience. Many of our Affiliate's prospective partner families have earned some or all of the sweat equity hours at the ReStore. We have hosted groups of volunteers from local businesses, universities, civic organizations and the military.

For Boise Valley Habitat for Humanity, the first objective for our ReStore is to generate revenues sufficient to cover the cost of managing the ReStore and our Affiliate as well so that all other donations and money raised can go directly to building homes. The second objective is to generate income which will be utilized by the Affiliate to increase its capacity to build homes for and with needy low-income families. In the third quarter of the current fiscal year, our ReStore met both objectives, with income of \$17,000 going to the building of homes for needy low-income Ada County families.

In early 2009, Affiliate employees and ReStore volunteers eagerly watched sales figures, anticipating our passing the \$200,000 mark. We held a friendly contest at the store, the person who picked the date of that milestone would win a gourmet meal prepared by the Assistant Manager. Sales were tracked so closely that we were able to identify the customer whose purchase got us over the goal. Lisa, a young mother, made that purchase in late February 2009. A photograph of Lisa and her daughter was featured in our Affiliate's quarterly newsletter to celebrate the success of the ReStore's first year in business. On a typical Wednesday more than a year later, Lisa happened to be in the store and we were catching up on her family's news and the goings-on at the ReStore. Lisa was astounded—as were we, really—that we had progressed so much in so little time. Total sales since our opening 26 months ago were nearly \$800,000. She promised to be the one to make the purchase that pushes us over the \$1,000,000 mark.

For all of the ReStore's dollar figures, numbers of donations and volunteers, all the reducing and reusing and recycling, all the friendships forged -- *it all goes back to this*: We are increasing the capacity for the Affiliate to provide simple, decent homes for needy families in the Boise Valley.

Years ago a few Habitat affiliates throughout the nation developed and promoted the ReStore concept. Many more affiliates have successfully followed suit. The affiliate for the Coeur d'Alene area was the first affiliate in Idaho to develop and continue to operate what is now a highly successful ReStore. Over half of the Idaho Habitat affiliates now operate ReStores.

Allison Haas, Assistant Manager

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