

REBUILDING TOGETHER:

BOOTHBAY BEGINNINGS

Rebuilding Together Lincoln County is a rapidly growing group of over 50 Boothbay Region volunteers who have joined to preserve and revitalize houses and our community, assuring that low-income homeowners live in warmth, safety, and independence. Our current board of directors consists of Laura Adams, Neil Ames, Joyce Armendaris, Sarah Giles, Chip Griffin, Steve Lorrain, Skip Krehling, Jim Taliana, and Allan and Dana Beth Wells-Goodwin.

We are one of the newest of the 260 affiliates of the national Rebuilding Together organization, which promotes the replication, coordination, and support of its affiliates in over 865 towns and cities and in all 50 states. Similar to Habitat for Humanity, which builds houses, Rebuilding Together repairs and renovates houses through the efforts of more than 250,000 volunteers donating over 2.6 million hours of time and over \$86 million in donated labor and materials to rehabilitate more than 8,000 houses and non-profit facilities each year.

Rebuilding Together began under the name of Christmas in April in 1973 in Midland, TX; 15 years later, in 1988, the organization launched the national headquarters in Washington D.C. Year-round resident Joyce Armendaris, along with her late husband, Alex Armendaris, joined as a Christmas in April volunteer for several years when she worked as a paralegal in Washington D.C. during the 1990s. Summer residents Paul and Chan Tagliabue have also volunteered since these early years. By 2001 Christmas in April changed its name to Rebuilding Together, to emphasize its expanded role as a year-round builder of community and to show that volunteers and homeowners rebuild together as equals rather than each group in April bestowing a belated Christmas gift of charity to a homeowner.

Joyce Armendaris worked for me in Griffin Law Offices as a part-time office manager from February to November of 2000, shortly after moving to the Boothbay Region in 1999. She didn't take long to plant the Christmas in April seed. I recently found my notes from June 8, 2000 when Joyce was suggesting to me that we get a group of people together the last weekend in April of 2001 to improve some home where the people are disabled, elderly, or poor. I found the idea attractive, but I had the usual excuses of not enough time and money. We Rotarians also had encountered some practical dilemmas of approaching people to assist and encountering the resistance of our neighbors' strong Yankee pride and independence. Frequently a community service home renovation project had been doomed by our inadequate skills of how to approach the homeowner and the problem. But I kept my notes, and Joyce kept planting suggestive seeds. Then, a year later, on November 16, 2001, Paul and Chan Tagliabue invited me and my wife, Denise, and another couple to dinner with them, when, as an aside (most of the discussion had been on post-9/11 security concerns and just catching up) Chan brought up the topic of Rebuilding Together, and both Paul and Chan described their very active volunteering, their membership on Rebuilding Together's National Advisory Council, and the NFL's support of Rebuilding Together. Chan suggested that Boothbay Harbor consider forming a group. Within just two weeks, I received a packet of information from Rebuilding Together's president and CEO, Patty Johnson, who wrote, "Chan does not miss a beat. So, the enclosed information is

being sent to you to encourage the formation of *Rebuilding Together Boothbay Harbor*. Rotary clubs are involved all over the country, and we encourage your leadership. And you know that we share a mutual respect and affection for those community-builders, the Tagliabues.” Well, I hadn’t studied this too well because I have a January 17, 2002 email from me to Joyce which reads as follows: “I remember your mentioning a worthwhile project (something to do with April?) for Rotary to consider. Can you refresh me on that? Possibly worthwhile for our Boothbay region?” Joyce, of course, responded immediately with all sorts of information and much enthusiasm: “Chip, this is SO much fun – and if Rotary is interested, I can get all the details for you. ... and, of course, I will help.” So I talked some more with Joyce Armendaris, and on February 7, 2002, Joyce, Neil Ames, Sarah Giles, and I met to discuss this further.

The four of us decided to try to launch this fledgling project initially through Rotary, which had the tax-deductibility, insurance, and volunteers to avoid the initial startup costs of a separate organization with an uncertain future in such a small community. Not to mention the challenges of organizing the effort with less than three months to go before Rebuilding Day. And it worked. For the first time, we were able to approach neighbors in need in a better way, thanks to the skills and resources of Rebuilding Together’s national support and thanks to two excellent suggestions from Laura Adams, now one of our directors and our treasurer: Evered Trask at Lobster Cove Road in Boothbay Harbor and Stanley Thompson at Adams Pond Road in Boothbay. During the last weekend in April of 2002, we gained the support of about 25 volunteers, about half Rotarians, including some Rotary-affiliated Interact high school students, and the other half comprised of other community residents. On Rebuilding Day, Saturday, April 27, 2002, under the leadership of Steve Lorrain, we painted the entire exterior of Evered Trask’s house and much of the first floor interior of Stanley Thompson’s house, as well as some other modifications. It was an incredible success.

We were then ready to grow into an independent group, and we thought we had a year to get ready for Rebuilding Day on May 3, 2003; we had decided to do it a week later so as not to again conflict with Fishermen’s Festival. We knew that we would need to raise a modest sum for incorporating, insuring, paying national dues, and obtaining an IRS-exempt 501(c)(3) status. Paul and Chan Tagliabue donated \$2,500 for this start-up expense. Sparked by Joyce Armendaris, Rebuilding Together Lincoln County became a Maine nonprofit corporation on July 11, 2002 and achieved a speedy 501(c)(3) status on September 20, 2002 in just over two months from its corporate creation. And, meanwhile, Patty Johnson, president of the national organization, traveled from Washington D.C. to our August 7 kickoff breakfast at Browns Wharf where she spoke to over 35 community members as we became Maine’s third affiliate, following Portland by a few years and Lewiston/Auburn by a day. Homeowner Evered Trask spoke glowingly about our efforts and has championed our cause all along. We received excellent input, invigorating energy, and creative ideas at this kickoff breakfast from area businessmen, selectmen, and other community volunteers.

But another proposed project haunted us and accelerated our work in 2002. I and Sarah Giles, another director (and a legal assistant at Griffin Law Offices) had visited with Carolyn and Helen Smith in March of 2002 as one of our contemplated house projects for April of 2002. Carolyn, 81, and Helen, 74, had lived in this house since 1957, just a few hundred yards from where I had grown up. I had noticed how their house was settling and needed some work, and so Sarah and I

dropped in to visit with them. We were struck by how tidy and warm their house was, and we discussed with them the possibility of doing some interior painting or some exterior house work. They asked nothing but were very grateful for our suggestion of home improvement assistance. Near the end of our visit, Carolyn said, "You know, I'd really love to have a flush." Sarah and I looked at each other in disbelief; Helen and Carolyn proceeded to show us their one pipe with just cold water to their kitchen sink and then pointed to their backhouse about 20 yards behind their house. I returned with Neil Ames, who applied his contracting expertise and quickly determined that there was nothing that could be done: the house would disintegrate if we installed piping under the house and there was nothing solid enough for attaching an addition to the house. Carolyn and Helen are the oldest, living natives of Spruce Point, and they prize their independence and pride of place. Even if they could rise to the top of some lengthy waiting list, neither wanted to move to low-income apartments. So the only alternative was to demolish the fragile house and replace it prior to winter, particularly because there was a real question as to whether or not the house and the Smith sisters could survive another winter there. With only about two weeks remaining before the start of the project in the fall of 2002, we had many volunteers but not one penny for our projected \$10,000 Smith house budget; I decided to start calling the names on my list without waiting for more meetings on how to raise the funds. It was like mana from heaven: my first call resulted in the full \$10,000 being given anonymously by a very munificent year-round resident! What a community! Jonathan and Debra Hodgdon very generously pledged to donate their trailer after they complete their house, which has been under construction, and move out of their trailer and into their new home. The Boothbay Harbor Fire Department performed a controlled burn of the Smith house at no cost, the Boothbay Harbor Sewer District and the Boothbay Region Water System waived their hookup fees, the Town waived its application fee, Reny Construction contributed over \$4,000 of donated labor and material, and many other tradesmen and volunteers have helped and continue to assist. We ran into obstacles, such as asbestos removal, but director Skip Krehling unilaterally tackled and solved that problem in just a few days. Our Rebuilding Together Lincoln County president, Neil Ames, coordinated all the contractors. The Hodgdon move and extra snow have delayed the installation of the trailer by three months, but Carolyn and Helen Smith are happily enjoying the warmth and comfort of a Park Street house donated by Nance McGovern. They no longer suffer the indignity of "no flush" and no hot water. And this experience has profoundly affected many of us. Here is a haunting question for me and for many of us: How could so few people (perhaps 2 or 3 neighbors) in our community have been unaware of their plight? Yet we gain a reinvigorating realization: How incredible has been our community's coming together to solve the housing problem of this one family!

We are currently working on three projects. One is to replace a window for a well-deserving Boothbay widow. Another project involves investigating some ways to help another well-known Boothbay Harbor resident stay in his house. A third project is to do some plumbing work for a disabled Boothbay Harbor man.

We are developing at least 5-10 additional projects for May 3 or perhaps earlier. Landscaping the Smith property. Helping a Boothbay Harbor widow remove over four decades of accumulated junk from her garage and to repair or replace a roof; she will offer the services of her son to help at her house and of herself to clean and paint in other community projects – truly

rebuilding together. We are actively seeking other homeowners in need, at least in the Boothbay Region, and perhaps in other parts of Lincoln County, this year.

Refurbishing the homes of people in need is crucial, both nationally and locally. The number of low-income homeowners in the U.S. will expand by more than 20 percent between now and 2010, from 22 million to 28.5 million. Lincoln County, with 83% of its houses owned by its owners, the highest in Maine, has exceeded the American rise in home ownership, which is now at an all-time high of 66.2%. Renting a home is becoming an almost impossible alternative for many people here, who can barely afford to own a home or cannot afford home ownership at all. Lincoln County's median age is also the highest in the state, 42.6 (and Boothbay Harbor's median age is second only to Ogunquit's in Maine), and the Boothbay Region is in the heart of the grayest county in Maine, which is the fourth grayest state in the country.^{i[i]} This high incidence of senior citizens adds to the homeowners in need here in the Boothbay Region and throughout Lincoln County. Of U.S. low-income homeowners, more than 25 percent spend more than half their income on housing, forcing them to choose between vital necessities, such as food or medicine, or a roof that does not leak. Our task is to ensure that as many of those families as possible do not have to make these difficult choices. Most of us agree that government does not do an adequate job. We must end our abdication to government as the solution and, instead, reclaim our own responsibility and volunteer to help our neighbors in need where real results can be accomplished: at the local, community level.

You can help, if you are part of a business, by donating materials and supplies. If you have some expertise as a roofer, carpenter, electrician, plumber, or other skilled trade, you can donate your services. You can identify some Lincoln County homeowner in need. You, individually or as a group, can donate money as a tax-deductible contribution. As an individual or a group, you can take charge of and sponsor one or more house renovation projects. Or, if you are like me with no talent, anyone can volunteer to help paint, lug stuff to the dump, or lend a hand or hammer.

Rebuilding together is all about community-building as well as home-rebuilding. Volunteering in some ways helps us as much as the homeowner in need. Let us begin by at least knowing our neighbors. As Robert Putnam, the leading authority on communities, observes:

Institutional reform will not work – indeed, it will not happen – unless you and I, along with our fellow citizens, resolve to become reconnected with our friends and neighbors. Henry Ward Beecher's advice a century ago to 'multiply picnics' is not entirely ridiculous today. We should do this, ironically, not because it will be good for America, - though it will be - but because it will be good for us."^{ii[ii]}

As Stephen Covey put it, "The four basic needs of all people are to live, to love, to learn, and to leave a legacy."^{iii[iii]} All of these basic needs are tied to community. George Bernard Shaw said it best:

"I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle

to me. It's a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."^{iv}[iv]

We hope that you join us in Rebuilding Together the homes of our neighbors and this very special community of us all. Add your spark to the splendid torch. Thank you.

Chip Griffin
February 10, 2003

ⁱ[i] 2000 Census.

ⁱⁱ[ii] Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone p. 414.

ⁱⁱⁱ[iii]ⁱⁱⁱ[iii] Stephen R. Covey, Principle-Centered Leadership,

^{iv}[iv] Stephen R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, p. 299.