



WHEN YOUR CHILDREN ARE VERY YOUNG, IT'S EASIER TO CONTROL THEIR ENVIRONMENT. You can throw a blanket over the kitchen table and pretend it's a castle, a boat, or a magical island. But as they get older, their world opens up, and they see how other people live. When my oldest child, Emily, was in kindergarten, she returned from a play date angry and upset. On the way home she asked me if we were poor. When her friends came over for her birthday, would they open the closet doors and ask: Where is the rest of the house? Where do you all sleep?

Back then, I was among the working poor. No time. No money. No hope. Being poor is like holding your breath for a really, really long time, hoping life will improve before their childhood passes. But eventually, you must draw a breath, no matter how toxic the environment is, and your circumstances will be realized. More humiliating than being on welfare, more humiliating than buying groceries with food stamps in front of your neighbors is facing your own children. Facing them when they ask "Why?" Why can't they have sleepovers? Why can't they go to the movies? Why did Santa bring so many things to their friends and not to them?

Worse than that is when they stop asking. They stop asking for things you can't afford to do or buy because they know there is no hope. Not for them. And then you ask yourself, what future exists for a child without hope, without opportunity? Opportunity is a beautiful thing. It's powerful. It's transforming. It's more magical than a blanket over the kitchen table. Because it's real. It's Habitat for Humanity.

I was given the opportunity to help build my Habitat home in 2001. From that moment on, with an affordable mortgage, I've been able to support my family. Although I've often had to stretch my dollars to get to the end of the month, I've been able to pay my bills and maintain a comfortable standard of living over the years.

My stories now are of happier times. When my youngest, Harry, was about to turn 12, my mother asked what he wanted for his birthday. So I told her, a four-wheeler, a dirt bike, and a new Xbox 360. All these things cost hundreds and thousands of dollars at the time. My mom, never missing an opportunity to critique my parenting, declares, "It's your own fault....doesn't he know you're poor?" As she began her lengthy monologue on how I

should handle the situation, I drifted away, remembering my daughter's words and rejoicing. No, he doesn't know. He's just a child, no longer subjected to the consequences of my choices.

Now birthdays are fun. On his party we had a sleepover with ten, 12-year-olds. They made s'mores and Jiffy Pop popcorn over a bonfire in our backyard, then played flashlight tag in the woods that surround our house. Later, they had pizza and soda, then retreated to our basement to watch videos and admire their newly-acquired bruises and scrapes. I listened at the top of the stairs as my son, surrounded by his friends, burped and laughed his way into his twelfth year.

This simple, perfect moment wouldn't have been possible without Habitat for Humanity. Habitat didn't give me a bunch of money so I could get my kids anything they wanted. They gave me a different kind of gift. One that fills the gaps between what I'm able to do and what my children need. A gift of space and time that will be cherished forever. A gift that can't be wrapped or spent but is invested in the character and soul of a growing family. All that in this little home.

A home. It's something we all need. How can a family maintain its integrity without a home? How can a community thrive without healthy families?

Habitat has certainly transformed my life. But, in many ways, my life hasn't changed at all. I still have the same friends. I still drive a school bus. I'm still a painter. Same kids, just older. Both have graduated college.

The miracle of Habitat is that it doesn't change who you are, but who you can be. Today, I am a homeowner. I am also a volunteer. I get to stand among these extraordinary people. Through Habitat, we help solve problems that other well-meaning organizations—and governments—can't seem to handle. If I had stayed on welfare, it would have cost more money to maintain my life of poverty than the cost of my home. With Habitat not only do I get a home, but I also get to maintain my integrity by paying my mortgage every month. Today, I can support my family. Today, I am helping more hardworking families change their lives...one home at a time. Problem solved.

