**The value of mercy in the heart of a nonprofit exec**

by Ali Parrish, Executive Director, Iowa Heartland Habitat for Humanity

I have learned in my life that showing mercy and compassion to others flows freely when it comes as a response to the mercy and compassion you know and understand that you’ve received. More simply stated: mercy comes from mercy.

So, what is mercy? Put simply, I suggest mercy equals compassion and love…and not just feelings and emotions, but actions expressed in tangible ways.

When I see mercy put into action, I have a front row seat as I experience the joy associated with seeing families whose lives are transformed by partnering with Iowa Heartland Habitat for Humanity. Stories of transformation abound. I know we are doing more than just building houses – many other entities can do that. We are walking with women and men, our neighbors and friends, who may be in despair, who may think they are nothing, and helping them discover that they are something.

As nonprofit leaders, we are often also called to be leaders in our families, with our friends, at our churches, in the workplace, in our communities and beyond. But leading is hard. I don’t know about all of you, but I often feel as though I’m leading on fumes. I am giving everything I have to everyone and everything else and saving just enough for myself to make it through the day. And some days, because of that, *I just don’t lead well*. It’s difficult to feel merciful toward others when I’m spiritually depleted myself.

Last fall, I found myself frustrated heading out the door of the office to visit the home of one of our Habitat homeowners, a real man, who for the purpose of this example I’ll call Steven. Steven bought his home from Habitat a few years ago and has experienced many hardships since that time including divorce, drugs, rehab and jail. During his trials, his parents have continued making the payments on his mortgage so he wouldn’t lose his home, too.

We found out that Steven’s homeowner’s insurance had been cancelled because the fire department was called out to his house over the summer, however nothing had been reported to the insurance company. So, the insurance company chose to drop coverage not knowing the extent of the damage.

Our staff decided that we needed to inspect the property to see what kind of damage had been done before we figured out what to do about the insurance. We set up that visit with Steven’s father.

To be honest, going in to the visit, my heart was hardened and seriously lacking mercy and compassion. I found myself casting judgment on not only Steven, but also on his father since he was “responsible” for raising Steven. I was frustrated with the unplanned interruption in my already too busy work schedule. I was frustrated that one of our longer-term homeowners was struggling so much – after all, Habitat’s program is supposed to ensure that doesn’t happen to a family, *right*? I was tired from many other frustrations in my week. I arrived at the house feeling judgmental and annoyed.

But, then Steven’s father greeted us at the door and dutifully started showing us around to every nook and cranny of his son’s home. To our surprise, the home was actually in very good shape. Fully furnished, fairly clean, homey even. My heart started to soften as I watched that poor old man show us the small section of the garage siding where a smoldering log from the fire pit had been placed too close over the summer, the heat of which had slightly warped it. That was the only damage done to the entire property. *That was it.* And yet you could see the remorse in Steven’s father’s eyes when he looked at us, and when he answered every question we had quickly and completely – you could almost sense the “sir and ma’am” he wanted to put at the end of every statement, but didn’t. Trying so hard to show respect…so the “suits” wouldn’t take away his son’s home.

When did we become *those people*? When did we become “better than”? When did we move from being Steven’s partners and advocates to being the judges of Steven and his father? Why did I suddenly see every single poor decision I had made in my life as “not as bad as” the poor decisions Steven had made in his?

Standing face to face with Steven’s father, a sense of shame washed over me and I realized that this person who was poor in spirit needed mercy…but *no more than I also needed mercy* for the condition of my heart. Steven’s problems were certainly heart-breaking, *but so was my attitude*. I immediately felt compassion for Steven’s father…and remorse for my own behavior.

Mercy comes from mercy.

One of the founders of Habitat, Millard Fuller, understood this when he said, “Of course, Habitat homeowners still have problems. They often are people at risk in society. Habitat works with them in good faith, knowing that owning a home is not the answer to every problem, but one step — often the very first step — toward helping people break out of the cycle of poverty.”

Steven may still struggle, but I was reminded that day that *so do I.* Steven is no better and no worse than I am – but wrapped in mercy, we are both forgiven.

I am blessed by the work of Iowa Heartland Habitat for Humanity and the opportunity to be a part of something that has such lasting local and global impact on a daily basis – not only in the houses that are built and repaired and neighborhoods stabilized – but through the transformation that happens when you walk together in relationship with another person, meeting them where they are, learning and growing together and realizing the lessons they are also teaching you through the process.