

Catalysts for Systemic Change

An Interview with Jonathan T.M. Reckford,
Chief Executive Officer, Habitat for Humanity International



Trisha Yearwood, Garth Brooks, President and Mrs. Carter, and Jonathan Reckford at a Habitat building site

EDITORS' NOTE Jonathan T.M. Reckford assumed his current role in 2005. His path to Habitat was neither immediate nor direct with stops at Goldman, Sachs & Co.; the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea; Marriott; The Walt Disney Co.; Musicland; Best Buy; and Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, Minnesota. He is the author of *Our Better Angels: Seven Simple Virtues That Will Change Your Life and the World*, which provides practical inspiration to bridge the divisiveness of the day. He is a noted speaker and sought-after contributor to home affordability conversations throughout the U.S. and around the world. Reckford serves on the boards of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, is the chair of Leadership 18 and is a member of the Freddie Mac Housing Advisory Council. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Urban Steering Committee for the World Economic Forum. He holds an MBA from Stanford and a Bachelor of Arts in political science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he was a Morehead Scholar. In 1986, Reckford was awarded a Henry Luce Fellowship.



Jonathan T.M. Reckford

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Habitat for Humanity (habitat.org) partners with people all over the world to help them build or improve a place they can call home. Habitat homeowners help build their own homes alongside volunteers and pay an affordable mortgage. Habitat has helped more than 7 million people build strength, stability and independence through shelter. Habitat homeowners achieve the strength, stability and independence they need to build a better life for themselves and for their families.

Will you highlight the history and heritage of Habitat for Humanity and how the organization has evolved?

From humble beginnings in a Christian farming community in South Georgia to operating in all 50 states in the U.S. and in more than 70 countries around the world, Habitat for Humanity has always sought to put God's love into action. Our heritage is deeply rooted in the belief that everyone deserves a decent

place to call home. As our organization continues to grow in size and scope of work, I am excited that Habitat has emerged as a leader on the issue of housing affordability. This gives us greater opportunity to raise our voice, along with our hammers, to build homes, communities and hope.

What have been the keys to Habitat for Humanity's impact?

In 2011, we developed our current strategic plan, which provided a new way of thinking about our mission and how we approach it. Habitat for Humanity has been building homes, communities and hope through direct engagement for four decades. As powerful as that has been, hundreds of millions of people still live in inadequate housing, and millions of others have no home at all.

This plan challenges us to become more effective catalysts for systemic change, change that will help exponentially more families than any one organization ever could serve alone. To meaningfully impact the housing deficit at scale, the plan calls for operating within three interconnected spheres of influence: community, sector and society. These "houses" sit on Habitat's strong foundation of mission-driven, purposeful work. As our organization strives to deepen its impact, this strategy has been invaluable in Habitat's success.

How does Habitat for Humanity homeownership work?

A popular myth about Habitat is that we give houses away, but that is not the case. First, future Habitat homeowners must demonstrate a need for safe, affordable housing. Second, once selected, future homeowners must partner with us throughout the process. This partnership includes putting in a certain number of "sweat equity" hours, meaning that they help build their home and the homes of their neighbors, and complete financial literacy and homeowner education courses. Finally, families must demonstrate an ability to pay an affordable mortgage. The payments are cycled back into the community to help build additional Habitat homes.

Will you discuss Habitat for Humanity's focus on advocacy?

Globally, our advocacy approach is aimed at supporting the development and implementation of policy solutions that will meaningfully increase the housing supply, establish communities of opportunity, optimize land use, and make credit more accessible to underserved populations. We are actively pursuing these measures through our U.S. advocacy campaign, Cost of Home, by mobilizing local Habitat organizations, partners, volunteers and community members across the country to push lawmakers at every level to create policies that will make the cost of a home something we all can afford.

What interested you in writing your book, *Our Better Angels: Seven Simple Virtues That Will Change Your Life and the World*, and what are the key messages of the book?

I was inspired by an essay that former President Jimmy Carter wrote in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017. In that essay, President Carter compared the disaster response to the world he once knew, when you counted on your neighbors and they counted on you. He wrote, "When the waters rise, so do our better angels."

In the book, I share inspiring and uplifting stories of the everyday heroes I've met working with Habitat for Humanity who embody seven virtues: kindness, community, empowerment, joy, respect, generosity and service. I hope this book will help readers find their own better angels and then go out to make their world a brighter place.

You became CEO of Habitat for Humanity in 2005. What has made the experience so special for you?

Habitat has given me the opportunity to exercise my faith daily. Last year, we served more than 7 million people, enlisting the support of more than 1.4 million volunteers. Since its founding in 1976, Habitat has helped more than 29 million people improve their housing conditions. I draw on President and Mrs. Carter as an inspiration. Though they are often credited with founding Habitat for Humanity, they are in fact Habitat's most famous volunteers. They are the embodiment of servant leadership. President Carter often says that working with Habitat is the best way he's found to put his faith into action, and I wholeheartedly agree. ●