

**A conversation with Habitat EJC co-founder Jean Camfield and first homeowner Christie
by Erica Bauermeister**



It's the laughter that tells you—this is a friendship of long-standing, full of respect and affection. These two women have changed each other's lives.

Twenty-five years ago, Jean Camfield was a founding member of the fledgling Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County. "We had enough money for one foundation," Jean says, "and that was it. We said 'what are we going to do?' and we then said 'we're going to go ahead.'" She smiles. "And the money came."

Back then, Christie was a young single mother with two children in diapers. Her paycheck as a nursing assistant at Kai Tai was about \$900 a month, \$550 of which went for rent in a small apartment on a busy street. She took college courses whenever she could manage to fit them in. A co-worker told her about Habitat and encouraged her to apply. Christie said no at first. "I was pretty stubborn. I didn't take hand-outs. But they said 'no, you've got to work for it' and I liked that."

We are sitting in the house Christie still lives in, a calm and beautiful spot in the world, surrounded by lush, mature landscaping. When she talks about building this house, she leans forward, so full of energy you could imagine her building it by herself, but what she talks about is the project manager who became a friend, the volunteers, the time when her mother came and helped put insulation in the attic, when her grandmother came to the celebration at the end. About the prayers in the walls, some of which she has found during the several remodeling projects she has done by herself over the years.

"I photographed them and put the photos in an album, and then I put the prayers back in the walls for someone else to find," she says.

This house made a radical change in Christie's life. It was a stable place, and the mortgage was less than her rent used to be, so she was able to get a bachelor's in criminal justice, with a minor in construction. She became the first member of her family to get a college degree, and the only one of her generation. As her kids grew, they were able to go the elementary school nearby.

Christie says "At first, when I started doing better, I felt guilty to have this house. But it makes you want to give back to the community." And she has. She's become a speaker for Habitat, and her job now is as a community correction officer, working with people after they have been

released from prison. She's in the national guard and has been deployed overseas two times. More recently, she's become a volunteer EMT, has fought fires in Eastern Washington, and is working with disaster relief groups.

As she reflects on her experience with Habitat, Christie says: "It's a lifetime investment. And generational. It's not about just one person, but their kids and probably grandkids." Christie has paid off her mortgage early, and this house will become her retirement, and perhaps provide her children with the stability it gave her earlier in her life. You could call the house a gift, but it is a gift that was hard won and has given back far more.

Jean chimes in now, nodding: "Habitat is a program that helps people help themselves. Everyone pays a mortgage, works on their houses, takes classes. I think it's the best kind of social service you can provide for people."

And then they are laughing again, an older woman and a younger one, talking about children and graduations and house projects and getting coffee together sometime soon.