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Greyheads rebuild 'habitats' for Bergen homeowners

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BY ANTOINETTE RAINONE
COMING OF AGE | THE RECORD

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PHOTO BY SETH LITROFF

Pat Esterson, center, is surrounded by fellow Greyheads, a group of retired men and women who volunteer for Habitat for Humanity Bergen. She is one of the group's original volunteers.

"Who's got a nail set?"

The shout out comes from Michael Stinson, a site manager with Habitat for Humanity of Bergen County. He and Chris Warburton manage the site where the Greyheads — a group of retired people who volunteer for the organization every Wednesday — are working.

For the last two months, the group has been rebuilding the basement of a Little Ferry home damaged during Superstorm Sandy. A few guys are outside working on a wood door.

"We are expanding a door to fit a larger opening in order to close up a storage area of the basement," explained Joe Zanini, who had been a commercial printer for 43 years before retiring in 2002.

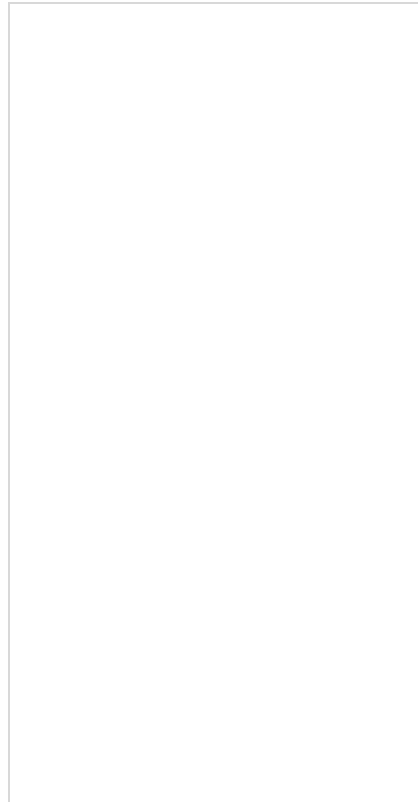
Each Greyhead has a personal story of why he or she chose to don a hard hat during their retirement days rather than, say, a sun hat on the lounge deck of a Mediterranean cruise.

Zanini, 75, recalls the day he volunteered for Habitat Bergen soon after retiring in 2002.

"It was a hot August day, and I was walking in Manhattan on my way to Port Authority. I passed a building where Jimmy Carter was working for Habitat NYC."

Zanini felt if Carter could do it, so could he.

After all, Carter's 1980 electoral defeat brought him involuntary retirement from the White House at age 56. But the former president and first lady chose to lead productive lives — including a commitment to build at least one house a year for needy families. Many retirees have been inspired by their example.



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Since 1994, the Greyheads in Bergen County have grown to a dedicated group of 40-plus.

"This group of men and women range in age from 58 to 88 and are truly the foundation of our construction volunteer efforts," said Nicole Murray, director of marketing for Habitat for Humanity of Bergen County. "They have become an integral part of our building efforts ... and present for every home we've built so far in Bergen County."

It all began in the living room of Pat Esterson, one of the original Greyhead volunteers. Newly retired as a psychotherapist, Esterson was 62 years old at the time.

"I have wonderful memories of those early years when we had construction committee meetings and struggled over who does what, when and where, when strong friendships were made and we all felt a prideful connection with each other," she said.

Although Esterson, now 88, has a PhD in psychoanalysis, she was no stranger to construction. Once a vocational education teacher who ran a woodworking shop in an East Bronx settlement house/community center, she brought along her woodworking and sheet metal skills to Habitat Bergen.

"My work with Habitat Bergen has been the most important experience of my life," said Esterson. "I love working with tools and building houses. Every minute is a total joy, and walking through a finished house is the closest I've ever come to a religious experience."

For Mark Valaitis, 58, volunteering with Habitat Bergen helped him as much as he helped others.

Valaitis was an accomplished mill carpenter who created high-end trim for buildings. But when he suffered a stroke, Valaitis lost a lot of his memory — including his carpentry skills.

"I had surgery and I knew there had to be a reason for me to make it through the surgery," said Valaitis. "Volunteering gave me a sense of purpose."

Habitat Bergen became an avenue for Valaitis to relearn the carpentry skills he had lost. There were a couple of mishaps — like the time he put a nail through his finger — but overall, Valaitis met the challenges with shining colors.

In this Little Ferry project, Valaitis' workmanship can be found in the framing and sheetrocking.

"We honored Valaitis with an award at our annual gala event," said site manager Stimson. "The Habitat Bergen staff and home-owners have come to recognize Mark as more than a volunteer, he is part of our family."

Bob Sandt, 74, is no stranger to volunteering. He was a volunteer firefighter in Hillsdale for 30 years, as well as a former chief.

Sandt, who loves wood working and kayaking, said he volunteers because it's his way to "give back in thanks for all that I have."

He also enjoys his time working with the Greyheads.

"My fondest memories of Habitat Bergen are my fellow Greyheads and the wonderful rapport between us," he said. "We work hard and we laugh hard!"

Vic Pedalino, 66, had worked in the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) for 28 years. After retiring, he contracted with the Federal Air Marshals for five years prior to becoming a Greyhead. Pedalino also volunteers at the Paterson Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together when Bergen Habitat is between projects.

"I volunteer because it is my opportunity to help others less fortunate than myself," he said. "The personal rewarding feelings derived from these activities make everything worthwhile."

"I had absolutely no construction skills when I started with Bergen Habitat," Pedalino added. "I enjoy learning new things every week, but I always need a good partner to show me the ropes. And that's what the Greyheads have done for me."

Bert Taylor, 69, worked in the healthcare and purchasing fields prior to the new chapter of his life as a Greyhead unfolded. His 27 years owning a house in Sussex County — where he learned how to fix things himself — prepared him for his this work.

"I volunteer to see what talents I can contribute to the community," said Taylor. "I enjoy meeting people and helping those who deserve a chance at a better life."

Like many others, Taylor was inspired by Jimmy Carter and his book, "The Virtues of Aging."

"There are life transitions about every seven years," explained Taylor. "When you're seven, you think of yourself. When you're 14, you start to think of others. At 21, you look to marry; at 28, you think about



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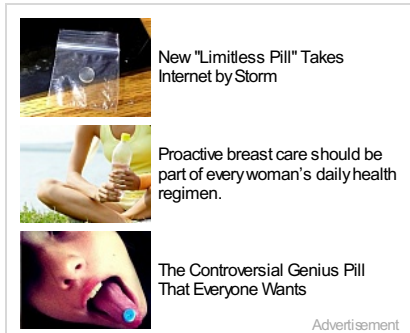


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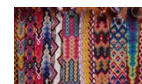
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"When you get into your 50s and 60s, you develop a world view. What in the world can I contribute to? What can I do in Little Ferry to help people?"

It's those burning questions that have guided Taylor — along with the other Greyheads — to give back as proud members of the Habitat family.

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