

# McKeesport celebrates latest Habitat project

## Rainy weather wipes out a planned wall-raising ceremony.

By EMILY BENNETT DILULLO [ebennett@yourmvi.com](mailto:ebennett@yourmvi.com)



Emily Bennett DiLullo / Mon Valley Independent

Speakers at Monday's Habitat for Humanity event in McKeesport, from left, are Mike Rizzo, chairman of the board for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Pittsburgh and the chief risk officer for Federal Home Loan Bank, McKeesport Mayor Michael Cherepko, president and CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Pittsburgh Dr. Howard Slaughter, U.S. Rep. Mike Doyle, state Rep. Austin Davis and state Sen. Jim Brewster.



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Federal Home Loan Bank presented a \$225,000 check to Habitat for Humanity for its new project on Lemon Street in McKeesport.

A rainy morning didn't affect enthusiasm from speakers and attendees during the Habitat for Humanity wall-raising event Monday morning in McKeesport.

A crowd of around 30 gathered on Lemon Street in the Peterson Plan neighborhood to witness the mayor, state representatives, Habitat for Humanity of Greater Pittsburgh officials and a Habitat resident receive a \$225,000 check from Federal Home Loan Bank for the new home build.

Attendees kept dry under the safety of a bright blue tent and kept warm with cups of coffee as the event — originally scheduled to feature a wall raising — began with an opening word from Dr. Howard Slaughter, president and CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Pittsburgh.

Slaughter praised attendees, calling them “brave” for attending the event despite the persistent drizzle. “We’re really excited to be in McKeesport,” he began. “Mayor, we love this city. Who saw the rain and wondered if we were still going to do this today? If you know Habitat for Humanity, you know we’re used to the rain.”

Slaughter introduced Michelle Offner, regional manager for Team Rubicon, as the first of many speakers for the gathering.

Team Rubicon formed in 2010 following a Haitian earthquake when a former Marine self-deployed alongside other volunteers three days after the incident. The nonprofit now has a volunteer army of more than 100,000 people who assist in disaster relief, Offner said.

“Collaborations like the one we have with organizations like Habitat for Humanity are critical to assisting our volunteers with obtaining practical experience that is put to good use in the field,” she said.

For example, the skills Team Rubicon employed after the devastation in Houston after Hurricane Harvey, in Florida after Hurricane Irma and in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria all required “the same skills that are learned and used in Habitat builds,” Offner said.

“That hands-on experience provided a platform for our volunteers to continue refining their disaster response and proficiency,” she said. “Our missions for Habitat for Humanity and Team Rubicon are not that dissimilar. We’re both nonprofits. We’re both out to help our neighbors and community, whether it’s this community, across the United States or internationally.” Offner said after participating in some of the Habitat for Humanity builds, some Team Rubicon members have signed up to deploy overseas to Vietnam to build homes. “So thank you Habitat for Humanity for bringing people together to build a home, hope and communities in Allegheny County,” she said.

Representing the Christian nonprofit Thrivent Financial was Kristen Thorpe. The financial organization has maintained a partnership with Habitat for Humanity since 2005, and have worked together to provide “safe, affordable and healthy living conditions for people around the world,” Thorpe said.

“During those years, we have contributed more than 6 million volunteer hours and over \$253 million dollars to improve communities,” Thorpe said. “Habitat for Humanities help families thrive. Research suggests that homeownership has a strong influence on family health, stability and overall quality of life. “Through our partnership with Habitat for Humanity, we understand we have the opportunity to literally build communities, and not just homes.”

This theme of community-building was echoed by the remainder of the featured speakers, who all agreed families are healthier and more engaged with their communities when they have a safe and affordable place to live. Mike Rizzo, chairman of the board for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Pittsburgh and the chief risk officer for Federal Home Loan Bank, was at the event to deliver a check to cover the costs of the remainder of the home build.

Rizzo explained the Federal Home Loan Bank is a government-sponsored enterprise and is comprised of a group of 11 banks. Congress requires that at least 10% of the bank’s income go toward affordable housing.

“Our affiliate is now the healthiest it’s ever been, and we’re helping the most families we’ve ever helped,” Rizzo said.

Although a family has not yet been chosen for the Lemon Street build, a current Habitat for Humanity McKeesport resident spoke to the crowd about the impact the organization has had for her and her family.

"I want to thank Habitat for Humanity and our Mayor Mike Cherepko for allowing this type of program to help people like myself, who would not be able to afford a home if it weren't for Habitat for Humanity," said Shawnda Dreyers, who lives on Jefferson Street.

"Thank goodness they had put out applications and my husband brought one home, and I said, 'They wouldn't let anybody like us get a home,'" she said. "I filled it out, and lo and behold, they chose us. I'm grateful and thankful for the opportunity to have a home."

Alongside Cherepko, three lawmakers were on hand to deliver their congratulations to the community for the new build: U.S. Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Forest Hills, state Rep. Austin Davis, D-McKeesport, and state Sen. Jim Brewster, D-McKeesport.

"I fervently believe when you give people a home, you're giving them so much more than a roof over their head," Davis said. "You're giving them hope."

Brewster encouraged those in the crowd to look over their shoulders about 100 yards, where he said he grew up as a child. Brewster, who is chairman of the McKeesport Housing Authority, said one of his lifelong friends still lives in the Peterson Plan neighborhood.

"When you bring a house in, when somebody wants to move in, that's a whole different accomplishment ... these things work," Brewster said. "It's such an exciting time to see people want to live here."

Doyle touched on affordable housing as a legislation priority, and said Habitat for Humanity is a positive force in providing affordable housing.

"Affordable housing is really one of the biggest issues we're confronting not just here in Allegheny County, but throughout the region," he said. "... Another family is going to get a shot to live in an affordable home and be a great member of this community of McKeesport and that's a good thing."

Cherepko expressed thanks as he addressed the gathering.

"Look around," he said. "And don't be fooled by these raindrops; it is an absolutely beautiful day here in McKeesport. I'm blessed with individuals that truly have the best interest of this city at heart, people who are working for the best interests of each and every day. ... When you add residents to our city, no matter how you do it, it's a critical component of rebuilding McKeesport." Nearing the end of the morning's rain-soaked activities, the sun finally peeked out of the clouds.

"Habitat is happy to be in McKeesport," Howard said.

**THE MON VALLEY INDEPENDENT**  
WHAT HAPPENS HERE, MATTERS HERE.  
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