

THE FOLLOWING IS A PRINTABLE EXCERPT.

For a complete printed copy of this publication, send a check or money order for \$8 to:

Civic Ventures

139 Townsend Street, Suite 505

San Francisco, CA 94107



CIVIC VENTURES **4** **INNOVATIONS**

Photographs by Alex Harris

Essay by Rob Gurwitt

Giving Shelter: RV Care-A-Vanners

INTRODUCTION BY MARC FREEDMAN

INNOVATIONS profiles the work of creative organizations that engage older Americans in new and compelling ways to revitalize their communities. The series — part of the documentary project REINVENTING AGE — is published by Civic Ventures, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the aging of America into a source of individual and social renewal.

INNOVATIONS | 4 | SPRING 2002
Giving Shelter: RV Care-A-Vanners

Photographs copyright © by Alex Harris.

Essay copyright © by Rob Gurwitt.

Design: Molly Renda

Series Editor: Susan Tomaro

Photographs for this publication were made at Habitat sites in Hartsville, South Carolina, and Jacksonville Beach, Florida.

We'd like to thank the RV Care-A-Vanners for sharing their stories and allowing us to spend time with them while they worked. We also thank Marge Kitterman at the RV Care-A-Vanner Information Desk for her time and attention to our many questions about the program.

Funding for this publication was provided through generous grants from the Helen Andrus Benedict Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and The Atlantic Philanthropies.

ALEX HARRIS, a photographer, is Professor of the Practice of Public Policy Studies at Duke University and a founder of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke. His books on aging in America include *River of Traps* (with writer William deBuys), a 1991 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in general nonfiction.

ROB GURWITT writes about how communities grapple with change for *Mother Jones*, *Preservation*, and *Governing* magazines.

MARC FREEDMAN, founder and president of Civic Ventures, is the author of *Prime Time* and *The Kindness of Strangers*.



Over the last several decades, a commonplace image has captured this country's notion of retirement. After years on the job and raising a family, a middle-class couple finally retires, packs up the RV with some belongings and the family dog, waves goodbye to the neighbors, and drives off into the sunset. They're free of the everyday responsibilities, ready to relax and catch what they'd been missing all those years. Among the weathered bumper stickers that tell of favorite family vacation destinations is a new one: "We're spending our children's inheritance."

But there is another caravan of RVs traveling around the country these days, headed in an entirely different direction. If these travelers are visiting the local museums, it's only on their weekends off. During the week, they're picking up hammer and nails to help build houses for the poor as part of the RV Care-A-Vanners, a program run by Habitat for Humanity International.

The concept grew out of one couple's search for a way to combine their longing to travel with their passion for Habitat. A dozen years ago, Jack and Lois Wolters occasionally called on their RVer friends to travel around and help on Habitat sites. By 2001, the Care-A-Vanners boasted some 800 active members—almost all of them over 50—who helped build more than 80 houses across the country.

Like many Habitat volunteers, the Care-A-Vanners may never have picked up a hammer before this experience. The sole prerequisite for membership is that you own a recreational vehicle, which could mean simply sleeping in a tent next to your car.

In *Giving Shelter*, writer Rob Gurwitt and photographer Alex Harris follow a number of RV Care-A-Vanners on their journey to reinvest in community—and not just their own—by helping low-income families make a fresh start. At the same time, these older adults are building the kinds of relationships they found most often on the job: relationships with a purpose. A new bumper sticker on the back of their RVs might well read, "We've got Habititis."

The RV Care-A-Vanners' story is told in the fourth issue of *Innovations*. This ongoing series by some of America's foremost photographers, writers, and radio producers is designed to bring to life, and to light, the work of creative organizations with the potential to reshape what it means to grow older in this country—to help transform the aging of America into a new source of civic renewal.

—Marc Freedman

Giving Shelter

Essay by Rob Gurrutt | Photographs by Alex Harris

DORIS WEBER FIRST HEARD FROM GOD IN A CONVERTED chicken coop in Englishtown, New Jersey. The 30 families who make up the Gateway Community Church meet to pray there. It is a plain building – long, low, made of cement blocks – and just as austere inside; its members are charismatic Christians, believers in “gifts of the Spirit” and not in plush velvet cushions or eye-pleasing arrays of organ pipes. They sit in metal folding chairs, facing a simple wooden cross, which is what Doris was doing when God said to her, *Habitat for Humanity*.

This was the first time she’d ever been addressed directly by the Lord. She didn’t know what to make of it, so she kept silent, telling neither her pastor nor her husband, Terry. But it happened again the following Sunday: *Habitat for Humanity*. So she sat Terry down and told him, and he agreed they had to pay attention. “Because the two of us are one after our marriage vow,” he says. “If He speaks to her, He speaks to me.”

The two had retired not long before, so they decided to head down to Americus, Georgia, where Habitat – the well-known nonprofit that builds houses for the poor – is based. When Doris called, though, she was brought up short. Lots of good-hearted northerners like to volunteer at Habitat during the winter – so many that the woman she spoke with, Marge Kitterman, advised the Webers not to come unless they felt like sitting around and waiting for some odd job to open up. There was another possibility, however. Most of Habitat’s houses are built by affiliates sprinkled throughout the country, but it has a lesser-known arm, the

The only requirement is that you have an RV – and even then, there are some who just travel in their cars and pitch a tent.

RV Care-A-Vanners, who travel in their RVs to whichever affiliates need help putting up a house. The only requirement, Marge told her, is that you have an RV – and even then, there are some who just travel in their cars and pitch a tent.

As luck would have it, right after the Webers retired they’d bought an RV with some money willed them by an aunt. They’d traveled to Alaska and back, and loved being out on the road. So in the spring of 1998, they drove down to Americus, not to help out in the office but to join the “Easter Morning build.” It was a massive, weeklong project that began Easter weekend with more than 1,000 people working on a 142-house subdivision known – not surprisingly – as Easter Morning. That week, working 12-hour days, the Webers and their compatriots put up 20 houses and even laid six feet of sod around each. It was the first time Terry or Doris had done construction beyond the basics familiar to any homeowner, and certainly the first time they’d ever been part of so mammoth and lively a project. They were hooked.

In the winter, they're down south, especially in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida; as temperatures warm, you can find them in Michigan, North Dakota, Vermont—wherever a Habitat affiliate wants help.

They're not the only ones. There are about 800 active Care-A-Vanners now—most of them retired—and their numbers grow every month. The program started in the mid-1980s, after Jack and Lois Wolters, a North Carolina couple, decided to help build a Habitat home in Immokalee, Florida, a small town in the middle of the Corkscrew Swamp not far from Naples. They drove down in their RV. “We got Habititis there,” says Jack Wolters. “It’s a wonderful disease, and very difficult to get rid of. So we just started traveling to different affiliates, to stop and work there.” One day, Jack and Lois were talking to Millard Fuller, Habitat’s charismatic founder and president. Fuller wanted to know whether they ever met other people in recreational vehicles as they worked on Habitat homes. “Sure,” Jack said. “Why don’t you do Habitat a favor,” Fuller responded, “and get a group of people like you started?”

In its first years the group was known as the Gypsies, and the Wolters coordinated it out of their home or, when they were on the road leading a build, their RV. Over the years, though, the project grew as more people heard of it and joined in and more affiliates—always stretched for volunteers—asked for help. Eventually, Habitat headquarters asked the Wolters to move to Americus and run the program out of its office; Jack and Lois, reluctant to give up travel and home building, agreed instead to let Habitat coordinate the program. Habitat decided to change the name to the Care-A-Vanners after its European affiliates pointed out that calling people “Gypsies” had more offensive connotations on the other side of the Atlantic. These days the program is run by a volunteer Care-A-Vanner who takes up residence in Americus for up to a year.

If you’re a Care-A-Vanner, you can satisfy the yen to wield a hammer pretty much any time—there’s almost always a “build” going on somewhere. In the winter, they’re down south, especially in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida; as temperatures warm, you can find them in Michigan, North Dakota, Vermont—wherever a Habitat affiliate wants help. Marge Kitterman, or whoever else is at the Care-A-Vanners desk in Americus, lists the builds that need volunteers on the web and in the group’s quarterly newsletter, which is sent to about 5,000 people who’ve expressed interest in the program. Three weeks after the newsletter arrives at mail drops or homes, Care-A-Vanners can call her to register for a particular build. “Those are frantic days,” Marge says. “Some people will sit in a

phone booth, sometimes in the pouring rain, waiting to get through.” It’s up to each affiliate to decide how many Care-A-Vanners it wants, but no more than 10 couples can sign up for each build. From there on the logistics are handled by one of the volunteers, who acts as team leader.

Since the various volunteers and affiliates get to know one another over time, an affiliate will sometimes request a particular set of volunteers, especially if they’re needed on short notice. So when Sharon Moon, who runs the Habitat affiliate in Darlington, South Carolina, decided she wanted some help with a house in nearby Hartsville, she asked Marge to get in touch with Terry and Doris Weber. In the three years since they’d become active with Habitat, the Webers had taken part in 16 builds, 10 of them as team leaders. They’d already been to Darlington twice and liked the warm welcome they got from Sharon, so they jumped at the chance to go back.



Habitat for Humanity RV Care-A-Vanners

RV Care-A-Vanners travel in their own recreational vehicles to help Habitat for Humanity affiliates across the country build affordable homes for families in need. The Care-A-Vanners, established in 1989 as a Habitat program and first called the “Gypsies,” now has about 800 active members who typically volunteer at a building site for two weeks at a time. Nearly all the Care-A-Vanners are older adults, and many work on several houses each year.

Getting Started

Habitat for Humanity International is a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian organization dedicated to building “simple, decent, affordable houses in partnership with those in need of adequate shelter.” Since its founding in 1976, Habitat has built more than 100,000 modestly sized houses sheltering a half million people around the world. Habitat is organized at the local level by independent nonprofit affiliates that coordinate “builds” and select families

in the local area. Affiliates seek volunteers to build houses; although the organization has a Christian focus, anyone is welcomed as a volunteer. The volunteers work alongside families who purchase the homes and are expected to invest many hours of “sweat equity.” Habitat keeps the houses affordable to low-income families, selling them at no profit and not charging interest on the mortgage.

Traditionally, Habitat affiliates connect with local volunteers for help. But an RVing couple named Jack and Lois Wolters provided the inspiration and the early coordination for a new type of volunteer. The Wolters had been living in their RV and volunteering for Habitat, both at the headquarters in Americus, Georgia, and with some affiliates in the southeast. During a conversation with Habitat founder and president Millard Fuller, the Wolters discussed the idea of RVers traveling around the country to help local affiliates build houses. Soon after, the RV Care-A-Vanners – then called the RV Gypsies – became an official Habitat program. The Wolters ran the program out of their home in Columbus, North Carolina, or from the road when they were leading a building team. They scheduled about 10

builds a year with affiliates where they had made connections.

Word began to spread. By 1998, the project had grown enough in interest both from volunteers and local affiliates to make it a part of Habitat’s Global Village Program run out of the main office in Americus. The Wolters handed over the reins, wanting instead to continue their traveling and building. Habitat also changed the name of the program to RV Care-A-Vanners after some of its European affiliates suggested the term “gypsies” was offensive in other parts of the world.

The program now reaches affiliates in more than half the states and into Canada, most often serving smaller areas that may have difficulty attracting enough volunteers locally. The RV Care-A-Vanners help affiliates with work at any stage of house construction or renovation. Care-A-Vanners also have helped in several disaster relief efforts across the country, including rebuilding after hurricanes and floods. While they are not first responders, they may work through local Habitat affiliates in the months following disasters.

During scheduled builds, affiliates must provide the volunteers with a place to park

their RVs; this could be a traditional RV park, but more often the Care-A-Vanners are directed to a church parking lot, high school football field, or other parking area in the community. The sites usually include waste disposal, and water and electrical hook-ups.

A typical build for the Care-A-Vanners is two weeks and comprises eight to 10 RVs. People participating in the program must have a recreational vehicle, such as a motor home, trailer, or van that allows them to drive to a site and sleep there. Care-A-Vanners also come prepared to cook their own meals, but they are often served lunch or dinner by community or church groups in the local area. While many volunteers bring their own small tools such as hammers, tape measures, and utility knives, each affiliate provides the necessary larger tools on site.

On the job, the RV Care-A-Vanners begin a usual seven-hour work day at 8 a.m. with devotions led by team members or people from the local community. The volunteers work all morning, break for lunch, and then continue construction until about 4 p.m., making sure the site is cleaned up and ready for the next day's work. Before dinner, they meet back at their camp site to debrief the day and make sure everyone knows what to expect on the next work day.

The volunteers generally work on a house Monday through Friday, and are often joined by the homeowners at some points during the week. If the Care-A-Vanners

build on Saturday, they frequently work with local volunteers who are only available to help on weekends. Otherwise, they spend weekends and evenings relaxing, visiting with community members, or taking in local sites.

Staffing and Operations

The RV Care-A-Vanners program, under the auspices of Habitat's Global Village Program, is staffed during normal business hours year-round by an information desk coordinator, who receives a modest stipend and benefits in exchange for a one-year commitment to the role. Periodically other volunteers stop at the Habitat headquarters and help with administrative tasks in the Care-A-Vanners office.

Habitat affiliates from across the United States contact the information desk coordinator for help, ideally six months in advance. There also are scheduled builds once or twice a year with Canadian affiliates. The coordinator tries to schedule builds close together both in timing and location so that members could sign up to travel from one to the next. Word spreads about the build schedule mainly through an RV Care-A-Vanners quarterly newsletter, the program's web site, and word of mouth among RVers. Some active members also speak about the program to church or civic groups and local media.

Each Care-A-Vanners build has a team leader, or leaders, often a couple who works with a few teams each year. The

main responsibilities of team leaders include working with the volunteer coordinator at the affiliate to arrange details of the build, contacting and orienting the team, and serving as liaison with the on-site construction supervisor. They receive a packet from the Care-A-Vanners office two months in advance that includes emergency waivers, information forms, a list of team members, and evaluation forms. The leaders contact other team members several weeks in advance with directions to the build site and parking area, along with other information about the build. They also arrive a day or two early to check the parking site and make final preparations for the rest of the team.

The information desk coordinator finds volunteer team leaders for each build, and then Care-A-Vanners call the office on specified days to sign up for the builds. The spaces are typically filled quickly, and many builds have waiting lists.

The program has about 800 active members, and a total of 5,000 who have expressed interest and receive the newsletter. The one common thread is that each owns a recreational vehicle of some sort. Nearly all the active members are adults age 50 or older, many are Christian, and they join the program with a wide range of construction experience. The members are racially and ethnically diverse, and are split about evenly along gender lines. Most participate along with their spouse or partner. Many contact Habitat after a few years on the road, searching for something more

than simply traveling around the country. Some members travel from site to site, working with Habitat for most of the year; the average, however, is three builds a year for a total of six weeks. Altogether, Care-A-Vanners clocked some 69,000 hours on more than 80 builds in 2001.

Costs and Funding

The RV Care-A-Vanners program operates on an annual budget of approximately \$24,500. Of this, \$10,000 covers a stipend and minimal benefits for the RV Care-A-Vanners information desk coordinator, who is considered an “extended level volunteer” at Habitat’s headquarters. Another \$8,000 is used for postage costs to send documents such as the quarterly newsletters, brochures, and materials to team leaders; Care-A-Vanners usually have mail forwarded to them on the road, so all the mail must be sent first class. The remaining funds cover printing, promotional merchandise, telephone charges, and other miscellaneous costs.

Each local affiliate pays the costs to build the houses and for on-site insurance that covers the Care-A-Vanners when they’re working. Homeowner families, in turn, purchase the houses through no-interest loans.

Funding for the RV Care-A-Vanners program is provided through Habitat for Humanity’s Global Village Program and private donations by Care-A-Vanners themselves. In addition, Care-A-Vanners

have donated money directly to affiliates to help with building costs.

Expansion

The RV Care-A-Vanners program has grown steadily, from its beginnings working with about 10 local affiliates under the Wolters’ coordination to helping with more than 80 houses in 2001. In January the Care-A-Vanners already were scheduled to help on 81 work sites in 2002, with that number likely to increase throughout the year.

Habitat continues to recruit new Care-A-Vanners and to promote the program among local affiliates across the country. According to the RV desk coordinator, however, the program does not have a specific target for growth of either its membership or the number of local affiliates requesting help.

In summer 2002 Habitat will test the Care-A-Vanners concept overseas. Twenty volunteers from the United States and Canada will travel to New Zealand where they’ll rent recreational vehicles and spend a month helping on work sites in two areas of that country.

Reading

Millard Fuller, *More Than Houses: How Habitat for Humanity Is Transforming Lives and Neighborhoods* (Word Publishing, 1999).

Millard Fuller, *A Simple, Decent Place to Live: The Building Realization of Habitat for Humanity* (Word Publishing, 1995).

Lynn Laymon, “Lending a Hand: RVers involved in Habitat for Humanity find it a rewarding experience,” *MotorHome*, Feb. 2001.

Carol Reeves, “‘Awesome team’ visits Corvallis for Habitat,” *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, Aug. 26, 2001.

Hollis Walker, “On the Road Again,” *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, Nov. 1, 1998.

Contacts

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY
RV Care-A-Vanners
121 Habitat Street
Americus, GA 31709-3498
1-800-HABITAT (422-4828), ext. 2446
rvinfodesk@hfhi.org
www.habitat.org/gv/rv.html

Also in the series

1 | *The Art of Medicine: Samaritan House Free Clinic*

2 | *Lessons for Life: Experience Corps*

3 | *Raising a Neighborhood: Hope Meadows*

