

# Hartford Business Journal

## Building Community

### *For its 75th anniversary, firm helping build Habitat homes*

By Matthew Broderick

September 26, 2011

During its history, the Hartford-based firm JCJ Architecture (formerly Jeter, Cook & Jepson Architects) has designed its share of big scale projects in the Hartford region and around the country, including public schools, hotels, casinos, justice facilities, libraries and performing arts centers.

But for its 75th anniversary celebration, JCJ is doing something much smaller, but with big impact — donating \$75,000 to Hartford Area Habitat for Humanity to construct two single-family homes in Hartford's Asylum Hill community.



Brooke Penders, director of development,  
Hartford Habitat

“As an architectural firm, we see Habitat for Humanity as an organization that is well aligned with our firm’s mission of ‘design that builds community,’” said Barbara Hubbard, JCJ’s director of communications. But JCJ’s involvement in the project — set to break ground this fall — goes beyond a big check. Employees will be involved in the construction, from swinging hammers to hanging sheet rock. “Our employees are eager and ready to do what they can to contribute,” Hubbard said.

And that’s good news for Hartford neighborhoods like Asylum Hill that are looking to bolster home ownership. According to census statistics, homeownership in Hartford is at 24.6 percent, among the lowest in the country for a city its size. In Asylum Hill, more than one-third of residents live below the poverty line. Only 11 percent of housing units are owner-occupied, the lowest rate among Hartford’s 17 neighborhoods.

Such low rates of home ownership can create transient communities which, in turn, can lead to problems like crime, drugs and violence which plague many inner-city neighborhoods. “Homeownership, however, has proven to reduce crime rates and create a greater sense of community,” said Brooke Penders, Hartford Habitat’s director of development.

And Habitat has been steadily building communities across Hartford, including six new homes that have been built in Asylum Hill to date. “In a typical year, we build about 10 to 12 homes,” Penders explained. “However, we receive about 90 applications annually from families seeking a home.”

Such large demand — coupled with relatively small supply — creates a highly competitive application process for would-be Habitat homeowners. Those fortunate enough to be selected must meet income eligibility guidelines, demonstrate employment history and undergo a credit check. They also must play an active role in building their own home, which can range in size from 1,280 to 1,400 square feet, depending on family size. Habitat requires a minimum of 150 hours of ‘sweat equity’ from each homeowner during construction, Penders said.

But it will be more than just the homeowners building the JCJ-sponsored homes. In addition to JCJ employees, Hartford Habitat is partnering with ServCorps, a volunteer service organization that provides Asylum Hill adolescents and young adults with experience in construction.

“We look forward to the opportunity to work with ServCorps volunteers,” said JCJ’s Hubbard. “We strongly support the potential to develop skills and awareness and give students valuable, real world experience.” That experience will also include learning advanced “green” building techniques to support environmentally friendly and energy-efficient homes.

And when construction of both new Hartford Habitat Homes is completed in 2012, JCJ will have changed the lives of two families and, in part, made Asylum Hill a little more stable.

But Hubbard sees these two homes as only a beginning.

“Our 75th anniversary donation is part of a plan to develop a multi-dimensional, long-term relationship with Habitat,” she said.

That’s welcome news for Hartford and the dozens of qualified families on Hartford Habitat’s waiting list for a new single-family home.