

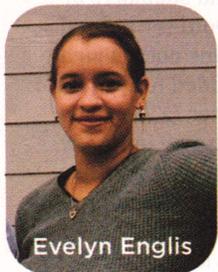
By Debra Judge Silber

# Hard Hat Angels:

# building a home for Evelyn



Greater Bridgeport Habitat for Humanity's Women Build Coalition



Evelyn Englis

**The job looked simple**—as in, simply impossible. Eight women needed to position a 24-foot-long wood beam across the foundation of a new house going up at 74 Orchard Street in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

That meant maneuvering it into position over the open pit of exposed basement. We had no hoists or pulleys, and it was all we could do to lift the beam. But we had determination and a plan. We tied a long rope to the front end and, four on each side, lifted it and walked it to the edge of the pit. Then one woman walked the end of the rope around to the other side. With some of us steadying the back of the beam as others helped pull the rope, we managed to guide the beam into place. But when we tried to lift the back end into its notch, it was too long. We discussed. We debated. We scrambled for the circular saw. A quick shave and a few whacks with a hammer and *voilà!* it fell into place. There were cheers and high-fives all around mixed with sighs of relief. This house really was going to be built, and *we* were going to build it. Our methods might be unconventional but, then, so was our crew.

I was working with the Women Build Coalition of the Greater Bridgeport Habitat for Humanity. It's one of almost 120 crews of women building houses across the country as part of Habitat for Humanity International's Women Build pro-

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gram—a program that puts the tools for providing decent housing to deserving families literally in women's hands. Every Saturday from March to September 2003, we snapped on our tool belts, tucked our hair under our hard hats and got to work building a house for Michael and Evelyn Englis and their children, Sewtana, 9, Luis, 6, and Michael Jr., 3. Evelyn, 29, was sometimes also there. Visiting the site one Saturday, she gazed at the moonscape of rocks and dirt that would be her yard and saw "flowers, definitely lots of flowers—and a slide for the kids." By summer's end, green sod surrounded the house. By fall, Evelyn and the children were able to move in. But the house wasn't really complete until April 2004, when Evelyn and the kids welcomed Michael Englis, 32, safely home from a year of military service in Iraq.

Evelyn and Michael had traveled a long way to that moment. They had been friends as teens but lost touch when Michael joined the Army and was posted to Germany. Evelyn went on to marry. When her marriage ended, she was left with two young children to support on her small earnings as a medical assistant. While taking classes at a community college, she met other students who were helping to build homes in Bridgeport's inner city with Habitat International. They invited her to join them. Evelyn still recalls the first time she shingled a roof. "I was so far off the ground, my heart was in my throat," she says, laughing. But she was soon volunteering regularly both as a builder and as a translator for Spanish-speaking families in the program. "She was very hardworking," says Iris Cordero Taylor, director of family services for Greater Bridgeport Habitat's Women Build Coalition.

Evelyn's employer was the first to suggest she see if Habitat could build a house for her. Evelyn was then living in

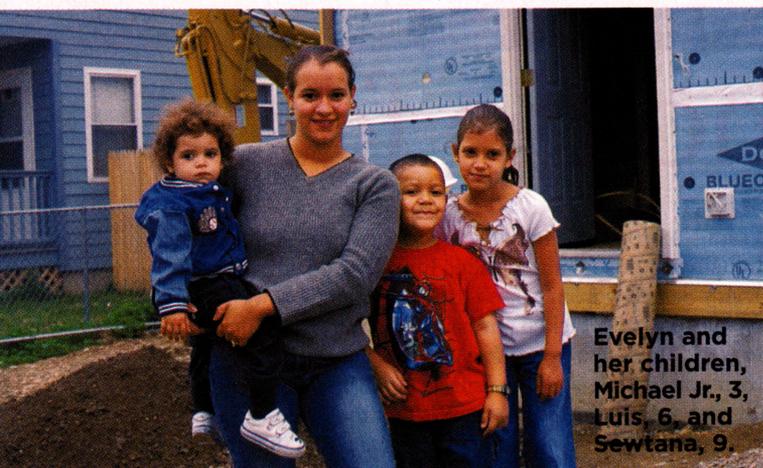
All photos: Paula Trotto.

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a small apartment. Owning a house was one of her goals. She applied and was pleased when her application was accepted.

Habitat houses aren't given away. They're sold for the cost of construction, which families repay in the form of a 15- to 30-year, no-interest mortgage. To qualify, applicants must show that they earn enough to meet payments but can't get a regular mortgage due to low income, bad credit rating or other acceptable reason. Instead of asking for a down payment, Habitat asks applicants to put in 300 to 500 hours of "sweat equity" helping to build their own house and other Habitat homes.

Evelyn had completed her hours when she and Michael met again in late 1999. Michael was studying for his college degree in order to become an officer. He was soon tagging along with Evelyn to building sites. They began dating and, in September 2000, they got married. With the house not yet started, Evelyn moved the family to Fort Carson, Colorado, where Michael was stationed, hoping the family could move back east into their newly constructed home when he finished his training. But then September 11, 2001, happened and everything became more complicated.



Evelyn and her children, Michael Jr., 3, Luis, 6, and Sewtana, 9.

"I took the kids over when the house was a skeleton, and they said, 'We're going to live here?' They didn't see any rooms. But slowly it began looking like a house, and then it was 'Wow!'"

Evelyn flew in for the ground breaking on her house in October 2002. The foundation was poured in February 2003. After that, Cordero Taylor kept her updated by phone. "She'd say, 'I drove by the site today—you have a basement!'" Evelyn recalls. Then, in April, Michael was deployed to Iraq. A few months later Evelyn returned to Bridgeport in time to help finish the build. "It was a great feeling to be able to do that and know this was going to be my house," she says. "I took the kids over when it was just a skeleton, and they said, 'We're going to live here?' They couldn't picture the rooms. But gradually it began looking like a house, and then it was 'Wow!'"

The Englis home is only the second one the Bridgeport Women Build Coalition has built. But in the past 13 years Habitat crews composed mostly of women have built more than 650 homes nationwide. The program was the brainchild of a group of female volunteers in Charlotte, North Carolina, who were troubled by the fact that although women made up half of Habitat's volunteers, less than 15 percent of its builders were female. To try to change that, they issued a call in 1991 for women to join the first all-female build. "The response was amazing," says Darlene Jonas, 70, whose idea it was. Hundreds of women turned out. "One woman called and said, 'I don't know much about building, but I can operate a forklift. Can you use a forklift?'" The idea caught on, and in 1998 Women Build became a department of Habitat for Humanity.

Women who have joined these builds say they are changed by them. "There is something about swinging a hammer while wearing work clothes, work boots and a hard hat that gives a woman a real sense of empowerment," says Bridgeport volunteer Gail Seirup, 53, a public-school secretary. Seirup also likes that whatever a woman's other life, "when you come to a build, you're just another person there to help." Beth Tonsky, 49, director of faith and educational development for Habitat's Canton, Ohio, affiliate, thinks women perform better when working mostly with women. "Men might cut you some slack, but the women never do," she says. "You can't get away with anything. On the women's house it's 'Girl, get in there!'"

Working with the Bridgeport Coalition taught me that "getting in there" can mean anything from assembling a wall to erecting scaffolding to sticking my head and shoulders into a hole in the ground to wrestle out a boulder lodged where a porch footing needs to go. It taught me not to flinch at the *whump* when I shoot a nail gun and added terms like Lally column (it holds up a floor) and preacher (a tool used to align siding) to my vocabulary. One woman on our crew who fears heights was proud of climbing 14 feet up a ladder to help install a window. She declined to clamber out onto the scaffolding, though, and that was O.K. "Women are very honest about what they can or can't do," says longtime Habitat volunteer Christine Lindeberg, 40, of New Haven, Connecticut, a journeyman carpenter and home inspector. "Even guys I work with all the time, they're not going to be so honest about something like that."

Many women say that female builders are also fussier about their work—more likely to measure, check and measure again before sawing and to hammer in an extra nail just to be safe. "Women Build houses definitely have the most nails of any Habitat houses," says Fiona Eastwood, national director of Habitat's Women Build program in Americus, Georgia. Or as Evelyn says, "We build them better."

But most notable is the spirit of cooperation. "Together, we can do anything," says Bobbie Best, 71, who operates the table saw at West Valley Women Build sites in El Mirage, Arizona. "If something's heavy, it just takes more people." Eastwood agrees. "What we lack in strength we make up in teamwork. Women have a wonderful ability to work together." And they enjoy themselves doing it. "It's not uncommon to hear women sing when they're working," says Tonsky. "I haven't heard a whole lot of men break into song on a Habitat site."

As a Women Build volunteer, I did most of my learning on the job, although, like many affiliates, the Greater Bridge-



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port Habitat office offers workshops in home construction. The training is free with the understanding that participants will put their new skills to work as volunteers. Most workshops are coed, but when Habitat offers workshops run by and for women, they book up to overflowing really fast.



Many women say **female builders are fussier about their work**, more likely to measure twice before sawing and to hammer in an extra nail to be safe.

As is common on Women Build sites, women did about 90 percent of the work on Evelyn's house, and contractors did jobs, such as wiring and plumbing, that require special licensing. Female contractors are preferred but hard to find, although getting more women involved in building may help change that. It was while working on a Habitat build that Christine Lindeberg, who used to teach job skills to the disabled, realized she wanted to be a carpenter. "I was nailing down trusses on the roof and I was suddenly overwhelmed. I stood up, looked around and realized that this was what I wanted to do."

Most volunteers, however, are average women who start out with no special skills. Homemaker Connie DeMattia, 59, of Fairfield, Connecticut, had seldom lifted a hammer until she joined the Bridgeport Coalition's first build. Now she owns a tool collection any handyman would envy and has taught workshops on shelving to other male and female volunteers. She and Norma Chalk, 71, who met on their first build, have earned such a reputation for their precise shelving and trim work that men on other Habitat crews vie for their services. "I thought, *Women building a house—that's an exciting challenge*," says Chalk. Her biggest fear when she showed up at her first build was that the men on site would underestimate her. She and DeMattia agreed that if any man asked them to pick up a broom, "we'd ask them to show us how to use it!"

Chalk and DeMattia are two of the Bridgeport Coalition's core volunteers who show up almost every Saturday during a build. Sheila Suleski, 38, a sales rep from Shelton, Connecticut, who oversaw the Englis build, is another. Watching a

house go up is more satisfying than sending a check to charity, she says. And as a volunteer, she has the satisfaction of being part of the process. "And I get to see the look on kids' faces when I tell them they can move in, and that is just better than anything." Says Eastwood, "For women, it's not just a job. A home means a lot to us. When you create a home for another woman and her family, there's that emotional connection as well." Says Evelyn, "It's a joy you can't describe. It's more a feeling than something you can put into words."

When I visited Evelyn in her new home in early 2004, while Michael was in Iraq, the living room was still sparsely furnished, but the kitchen was bright with images of sunflowers on the curtains, dish towels and wallpaper border. Evelyn loves sunflowers. She gave one to Michael when they got married "because he's my sunshine," she says. The house is the seventh Habitat has built in East Bridgeport, and Evelyn says the cooperative spirit she has felt on builds is alive and well in the community. "We're always helping each other. You should see it when it snows. We're all out there digging each other out." She hasn't had to do any repairs yet. "But I have my toolbox and portable drill. So whatever happens, I'm ready."

When Michael came home in April and saw the house for the first time, he was duly impressed. "They did a great job," he says. "I know Evelyn is proud, and I'm proud of her." He admits he took some ribbing from his Army buddies because women built the house. "But I thought it was cool."

Unfortunately, the family reunion was brief. Two weeks later Michael flew to Colorado for "reintegration" classes. He

## Join the Crew!

Women Build crews are at work in almost 120 communities throughout the United States. They are also active in several countries abroad. To find out about volunteer opportunities near where you live, call Habitat for Humanity International at 1-800-422-4828. You can also go to [www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org) and click on "Get Involved" to find the Habitat affiliate nearest you. To search for Women Build projects in particular, go to the Web site [www.womenbuild.net](http://www.womenbuild.net).

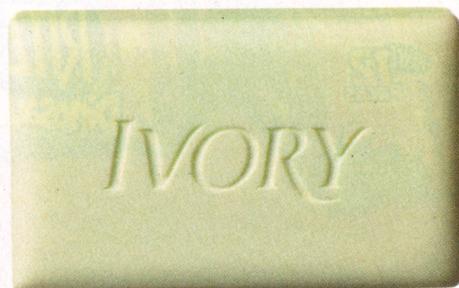


then went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where his family visited often, to finish his captain's training. In February he will go to Washington State to take command of a unit. After that he expects to return to Iraq. Evelyn and the kids will remain in Bridgeport while he's gone. Beyond that, the family can't really plan. "But Evelyn and I say if we can make it through a year in Iraq, we can make it through anything," says Michael.

For now, Evelyn is just proud and grateful to have the little house on Orchard Street that she and so many other women have put so much love and care into. Surrounded by her children, her relatives and friends, helpful neighbors and sister- and brother-builders, it's the only place she can imagine living while Michael is away and she and the children wait and pray for his safe return. "It's where my family is," says Evelyn. "It's where his family is. It's our foundation. It's our home." **FC**



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