



Habitat Happenings

JANUARY – JUNE 2026 • VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1

WARREN COUNTY



SUSSEX COUNTY



DOUBLE COVER STORY • WARREN COUNTY & SUSSEX COUNTY

Two Counties, Two Homes, One Mission

In Washington Township, a Mine Hill Road build rises beam by beam. In Wantage, a Sussex County home restoration nears completion. Together, they tell the story of Habitat NWNJ's first full season as a merged affiliate.

Our Mission: Seeking to put God's love into action, Habitat for Humanity brings people together to build homes, communities, and hope.

Welcome to Habitat Happenings



Ben Eskow

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Friends, neighbors, volunteers, and donors — welcome to the very first edition of Habitat Happenings, our new newsletter connecting our community across Warren and Sussex Counties.

The past six months have been a remarkable season for Habitat for Humanity Northwest New Jersey. We've been building, repairing, advocating, and serving — and none of it happens without you. Whether you've picked up a hammer on a build site, made a gift, or simply told a neighbor about our work, you are part of every home we complete.

This issue captures the breadth of what our community accomplished together in the first half of 2026: a home rising beam by beam in Washington Township; a restoration transforming a Sussex County family's life; corporate partners rolling up their sleeves; faith communities mobilizing for neighbors in need; and our voice reaching the halls of Congress to fight for the affordable housing every family deserves.

"We know that solving the housing crisis requires meaningfully increasing the supply of affordable starter homes. We need bold policy action, and we're committed to partnering with lawmakers who share our desire for every family to have access to a safe, decent, and affordable place to call home."

— BEN ESKOW, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

There is so much more work ahead. If you're not yet a volunteer, I hope these pages inspire you to join us on a build site. If you're a longtime supporter, thank you — your faithfulness makes everything possible.

With gratitude and hope,

Ben Eskow

Chief Executive Officer, Habitat for Humanity Northwest New Jersey

33+

YEARS SERVING NJ

86

HOPE IN THE HILLS
VOLUNTEERS

1,300+

SERVICE HOURS THIS SPRING

\$46K+

RAISED AT BEAMS & DREAMS

A Home Rising, Beam by Beam

Drive down Mine Hill Road in Washington Township on any given weekday, and you're likely to spot a cluster of volunteers in work gloves and tool belts, moving with purpose. "The pace is picking up," a crew member recently noted. "If you happen to drive by, beep and wave at our amazing crew."

What started as a bare foundation in the cold early weeks of 2026 has grown into a full two-story home — framed, sheathed, sided, and windowed — steadily becoming the place a family will soon call their own. It's one of the most visible signs of Habitat NWNJ's growing capacity since the 2025 merger of the Warren and Sussex County affiliates.



Volunteers working together on wall framing at 41 Mine Hill Road — the kind of teamwork that turns a foundation into a family's future.



Mid-build: rafters reaching skyward as the home takes shape.



Inside the walls: every doorway framed is a threshold of possibility.

One of the most meaningful moments this season came during the Visions Federal Credit Union Day of Service in March, when the husband of the partner family came to the site and worked alongside the volunteer crew. He was there — not just watching, but *building* his own home, side by side with strangers who had become neighbors.

"Meeting the partner family and seeing how excited they are to be able to afford a home to call their own is an opportunity that will not be forgotten any time soon."

— HABITAT NWNJ VOLUNTEER

What a Transformation

It's been a season of change at 392 Route 565 in Wantage. What began as a modest structure in need of significant work has — board by board, window by window — become something remarkable.



EARLIER THIS YEAR



LOOKING GREAT NOW

From bare framing in winter snow to a home with new siding, windows, and a welcoming front porch — the Wantage restoration is proof of what community-powered Habitat work can accomplish.

This project represents something especially meaningful for Habitat NWNJ: our growing presence in Sussex County, which we now serve more deeply than ever following our 2025 merger. The affiliate has served Sussex County since 1993, and this restoration is a reminder that our commitment extends to every corner of Northwest New Jersey.



Another angle of 392 Rt. 565 — new siding, new windows, and a screened porch bring this Wantage home to life.

Neighbors passing by the property this spring have watched the transformation unfold in real time — proof that with the right hands and the right heart, a house in need can become a home to be proud of.

Beams & Dreams: A Night That Built More Than Memories

\$46,200

RAISED FOR HABITAT NWNJ PROGRAMS

On behalf of the planning committee — thank you. To everyone who attended, sponsored, bid, donated, and celebrated with us: you made Beams & Dreams a night to remember and a gift that will last far beyond the evening itself.

Perona Farms set a beautiful stage. GruviTune kept the energy high all night. The auction baskets were filled with remarkable items. And when the final totals came in, our community had raised over \$46,200 to go directly toward Habitat for Humanity Northwest New Jersey programs — homes, hope, and the families who will one day open their own front door because of this night.

Let's do it again next year.

Thank You to Our Generous Sponsors

FRONT DOOR KEY

Valley Bank

ROOF

iHeartMedia Tri-State · PHNX Development Partners · Thorlabs

WALLS

The Meat Shoppe by Arctic Foods · Russo Law Offices · First Hope Bank · DSM-Firmenich · H2M Architects + Engineers · Blue Ridge Lumber · WRNJ Radio · Phillipsburg Rotary · Nisivoccia · Hackettstown Rotary Club/Foundation

FOUNDATION

Unity Bank · Sussex County Community College · Family Promise of Sussex County · Abilities of Northwest New Jersey · Swift Print Solutions · Planet Networks · Project Self-Sufficiency · Community Blend · Carole A. Sarson, CIC · Stuber Insurance Agency · Jefferson Recycling · Norwescap · Servant's Heart Ministry · Atlantic Health · SSI

When Companies Show Up, Families Get Closer to Home

Two of our outstanding corporate partners rolled up their sleeves this spring — not at a conference room table, but at 41 Mine Hill Road, hammers in hand.

VISIONS FEDERAL CREDIT UNION



The Visions FCU team brought energy and commitment to the Mine Hill build on March 24.

DSM FIRMENICH



DSM Firmenich volunteers raised the ridge beam on April 9 — safety helmets on, spirits high.

On March 24, a team from Visions Federal Credit Union gave a day of their time to frame walls, learn new skills, and connect with a mission that goes far beyond the office. A standout moment: the partner family's husband was working on-site that very same day. The joy of that shared experience — a corporate team and a future homeowner building together — is something no boardroom exercise could replicate.



Volunteers on the Visions FCU team framing lumber, with the Habitat trailer close at hand.



After a full day of roofwork, the DSM Firmenich team and Habitat crew shared a well-earned meal together.

On April 9, colleagues from DSM Firmenich took on one of the most physically demanding tasks of the build — helping raise roof rafters with hard hats on and smiles ready. When the day ended, the whole crew gathered around a picnic table, pizza boxes open, the satisfaction of a hard day's work settling in.

Bring Your Team to the Build Site

Interested in organizing a Corporate Day of Service? We'd love to hear from you — contact Melanie Thiel.

Taking the Case for Affordable Housing to Congress



Habitat advocates — including our own Chief Executive Officer Ben Eskow — gathered on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in February for the 20th annual Habitat on the Hill. This year's event coincided with Habitat for Humanity's 50th anniversary.

20th

ANNUAL HABITAT ON THE HILL

48

STATES REPRESENTED, PLUS D.C. &
PUERTO RICO

65M+

PEOPLE HELPED BY HABITAT WORLDWIDE

Building homes matters. So does changing the systems that make homes unaffordable in the first place. This February, Chief Executive Officer Ben Eskow joined hundreds of Habitat advocates from 48 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico in traveling to Capitol Hill to make that case directly to Congress.

The 20th annual **Habitat on the Hill** was a milestone event, coinciding with Habitat for Humanity's 50th anniversary — a moment to reflect on a global legacy of more than **65 million people** helped to build or improve the place they call home. Affordability remains a top issue facing Americans today, and rural, urban, and suburban communities nationwide are experiencing this historic loss of affordable homeownership opportunities.

Ben met with representatives including Senator Cory Booker and Senator Andy Kim to press for legislative action on the housing crisis — specifically, bipartisan bills already advancing in both chambers: the ROAD to Housing Act (S. 2651) and the Housing for the 21st Century Act (H.R. 6644). Habitat for Humanity also championed new Homeownership Supply Accelerator — a proposal designed to rapidly increase the construction of affordable homes nationwide.

Your support of Habitat NWNJ doesn't just help one family in Warren or Sussex County. It amplifies a movement reaching Congress, shaping policy, and working toward a day when every person has a decent place to call home.

Miles of Smiles: The 16th Annual Hope in the Hills



The numbers tell part of the story. But behind every task completed, there was a hand outstretched, a neighbor served, and a smile exchanged.

86

VOLUNTEERS (64 ADULTS, 22 YOUTH)

170

TASKS COMPLETED (INCL. 24 SAFETY
REPAIRS)

1,300+

VOLUNTEER HOURS (EQUIV. TO 57 FULL
DAYS)

For the 16th year, the Hope in the Hills of Warren — a community outreach extension of Habitat NWNJ — swept across the Warren Hills sending district like a wave of grace. Under the banner "Miles of Smiles," 86 volunteers served 25 homes belonging to elderly, low-income, and disabled homeowners who needed a helping hand most.

The weekend wasn't just about tasks completed. It was about moments of connection that organizer Jennifer Knittel described as "God sightings" — the kind only possible when a community chooses to show up for one another.

"A swing set finding the right home, flowers that perfectly matched the planters, the right skills showing up for each task, and volunteers stepping in to help when others had to leave — these moments remind us that this work is guided by something greater than ourselves."

— JENNIFER KNITTEL, HOPE IN THE HILLS ORGANIZER

Teams of teenagers and adults — representing Christian denominations and community organizations across the region — gave 1,300 hours of service, equivalent to nearly two full months of continuous work. Twenty-four of those tasks were critical safety repairs that will protect vulnerable homeowners for years to come.

GET INVOLVED

There's a Place for You on the Build Site



Every skill level and background is welcome on our build sites — no experience necessary.

No experience necessary. Just a willingness to show up, work hard, and be part of something that matters. Here's how you can get involved:

Build Day Volunteer

Join our crew at active build sites in Warren and Sussex Counties. All skill levels welcome.

Home Repair

Help us serve elderly and low-income homeowners through our repair and restoration programs.

Corporate Team Build

Bring your team together for a Day of Service. A meaningful experience, a lasting impact.

Sign Up to Volunteer at habitatnwnj.org

Or contact Melanie Thiel • 908-835-1300 x11 • melanie.thiel@habitatnwnj.org

WITH GRATITUDE · STAFF TRANSITIONS

Thank You, and Godspeed

Every organization is shaped by the people who pour themselves into it. This season, we said farewell — or more accurately, "see you later" — to two individuals who have left a lasting mark on Habitat NWNJ.



John Hylkema

CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER · MARCH 2021–MARCH 2026

After nearly five years of dedicated service, John retired on March 13, 2026. He brought clarity and structure to our financial operations — organizing the books, guiding our complex merger with steady hands, and ensuring the timely completion of annual 990 filings. His legacy of financial integrity will sustain this organization for years to come. In retirement, John is looking forward to working on his car and spending precious time with his grandchildren. A well-earned next chapter, John.



Brooklyn Rajnai

BRAND MANAGER · AMERICORPS VISTA · 2025–2026

Brooklyn joined us as an AmeriCorps VISTA and spent the past year elevating our storytelling and visual presence in ways that will outlast her time here. Her artistic eye helped bring our mission to life in new ways, and she was an essential part of our fundraising events, especially Beams & Dreams and the Have a Heart for Habitat Radiothon on WRNJ Radio. As she heads to Florida for her next chapter, we send her off with deep gratitude and our very best wishes.

IN MEMORIAM



John E. "Jack" Hornstra

March 3, 1940 – May 6, 2026 • Age 86

John E. Hornstra, 86, of Vernon, New Jersey, passed away on May 6, 2026, leaving behind a legacy of love, dedication, and quiet generosity that touched countless lives.

Born on March 3, 1940, in Passaic, New Jersey, Jack built a life defined by hard work, humility, and a steady, dependable spirit. For more than 40 years, he served as the head mechanic at Royal Pontiac & Oldsmobile in Butler, New Jersey, where his skill, patience, and unwavering reliability earned him deep respect from coworkers and customers alike.

After retiring, Jack continued to give of himself by volunteering with Habitat for Humanity in Sussex County — helping many families achieve the dream of having a home. The hands that had spent decades repairing engines spent 20 more years building hope for others. His quiet generosity and faithful presence on build sites embodied the very heart of this mission.

"His hands, which had spent decades repairing engines, now spent 20 more years specializing in building hope for others."

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to:

Habitat for Humanity Northwest New Jersey

31 Belvidere Avenue, Washington, NJ 07882-1414

Every Dollar Builds More Than a House

Your gift to Habitat NWNJ helps families in Warren and Sussex Counties access safe, affordable homes — and strengthens the entire Northwest New Jersey community.

Habitat for Humanity Northwest New Jersey is an accredited 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

Donate at habitatnwnj.org

Volunteer Today

Coming soon...Hear about the Franklin Village Duplex Homes in the next issue of Habitat Happenings



WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

Active Projects & Ways to Stay Connected

Current Home Projects

- Mine Hill Rd., Washington Township (Warren County)
- Three duplex homes, Franklin Township (Warren County)
- Home restoration, 392 Rt. 565, Wantage (Sussex County)

ReStore

Shop affordable home goods and furnishings, and support our mission every time you buy or donate. Visit habitatnwnj.org for hours. Habitat ReStore, 384 Rt. 57 West, Washington, NJ
ReStore on Belvidere, 30 Belvidere Ave. Washington, NJ

Stay in Touch

908-835-1300 • Melanie Thiel, x11 ✉ melanie.thiel@habitatnwnj.org habitatnwnj.org

Facebook: Habitat for Humanity Northwest New Jersey

Instagram: [@habitatnwnj](https://www.instagram.com/habitatnwnj)



Seeking to put God's love into action, Habitat for Humanity brings people together to build homes, communities, and hope. — Habitat for Humanity Northwest New Jersey is an accredited 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

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Serving Warren County since 1999 • Serving Sussex County since 1993

You are receiving this newsletter because you are a valued member of the Habitat NWNJ community.
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