

## College students tackle plans for Seymour Street homes

For most of the last 15 years, students at Middlebury College have been volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, helping crews construct houses all over Addison County. They've become a valued part of Habitat's process, and many have gone on to work on Habitat projects elsewhere after graduation.

This year, architecture students from Middlebury are partnering with Habitat for Humanity of Addison County in a whole new way, helping design homes for two families, on a site in Middlebury. Habitat hopes to build the homes in 2019.

During the spring semester, 14 stu-

**John McLeod, right, with students in his Middlebury College architectural design class.**

dents in Intermediate Architectural Design, a course taught by Middlebury professor John McLeod, explored possibilities for the site, at 51 Seymour Street. Habitat recently acquired the parcel from Addison County Community Trust; a multi-family dwelling had been on the site but had to be torn down because it was in disrepair.

Guided by McLeod, who is also a principal in a local firm, McLeod Kredell Architects, the college students researched the town's zoning regulations, examined the deed, analyzed the lot, determined the local and state permitting requirements, spoke with neighbors, and learned about Habitat for Humanity's specific needs.

The students developed three approaches to the project, including a single subdivided building ("only

child"), two buildings partially connected ("conjoined"), or two completely separate structures ("detached"). They built 3-D models and created scale drawings to better understand the challenges and the possibilities. They then met—along with representatives from Habitat for Humanity and their professor—with members of the town's Design Advisory Committee (DAC).

With feedback from the neighbors; the DAC; Jennifer Murray, the town's director of planning and zoning; and the Habitat board, "We developed the preliminary design concepts into a single design scheme," McLeod said, "which includes two small houses and a shared storage shed. After receiving approval from Habitat's Building Committee for this proposed design, we met again with the director of planning and zoning and the DAC to present our progress."

That was followed by a presentation, on May 14, to Middlebury's Design Review Board, the group that will have to approve the project. The students, along with McLeod and Habitat board president Mickey Heinecken, took part in the presentation and fielded numerous questions from the DRB and residents in the audience. Board members and residents raised questions about how the ownership of the buildings and the lot would be structured, and about how to deal with a seasonally wet area, which affects not only the Habitat lot but several others on the west side of Seymour Street.

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All in all, DRB members were impressed with the design work, the thought that had gone into it, the students' choice of materials, and the presentation generally. McLeod, Habitat board members and the students will be discussing ways to address the issues raised and expect to come up with strategies to present to the DRB at a future meeting.

Heinecken, who lives in Cornwall and was for many years the head football coach at Middlebury College, called the partnership between students and Habitat "a brave new endeavor."

"Habitat benefits from the creative energy brought by the students," he said, "and they in turn experience firsthand the challenges of creating affordable housing. The collaboration also brings to the forefront the real need for affordable housing in Addison County, not just in the eyes of the students but for everyone fortunate enough to live here."

Sophomore Paige Ballard, one of the students in the class, would agree. "We're dedicating ourselves to creating two homes that will have real and lasting impact on the neighborhood, the town and—most importantly—the families that will reside within them," she said. "It's exciting to work on such

#### **Brainstorming with models of the Seymour Street site.**



#### **Students present their work on the Habitat project to Middlebury's Design Review Board in May.**

a wholesome, large-scale, professional-level project."

Reed Martin, a Middlebury junior who presented the landscaping plan at the DRB meeting, said the primary goal of the class is to "interact with Habitat for Humanity representatives and community members to design a project that fits into the constructed and natural context of Middlebury. This opportunity to see what a design project looks like from conception to construction has caused me to rethink the intricacies of the architectural process in how it relates to community, aesthetic, and sustainability."

Student John Henry Hanson pointed out that in most undergraduate courses in architecture, "the design-build process is theoretical, because there is no client and the project will not be built." But this course is different

because "the student is faced with the responsibilities of a practicing architect—creating a conversation with the site, the people of the town, and fellow designers. To see these challenges realized as a new home in Middlebury will be

one of the most influential experiences in my study of architecture."

After conclusion of this semester's initial design phase, McLeod plans to engage students in a course next fall that will advance design development, prepare working drawings, and perform cost estimates. Then during winter term, students will finalize the drawings and other details to get ready for construction—by Habitat for Humanity volunteers—in the spring of 2019.

"This is an incredible opportunity for students to work on a 'real project' and everything that brings with it: real clients, permitting requirements, public opinion, budget limitations, construction issues, and the importance of making something thoughtful, respectful, optimistic and pleasing," said McLeod.

He hopes the pilot project will prove successful for Habitat, the students, the College as a whole, and the community, and will lead to a continued partnership between the college and Habitat: "I think it's incredibly important that everyone is working together to create affordable housing in Addison County—and energy-efficient, well-designed houses at that—and I hope it continues."

— Our thanks to Middlebury College's Robert Keren for his reporting on this story, and to Todd Balfour for his photos.

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

### Harold Strassner

It's been 52 years since Harold Strassner and his wife, Sharon, arrived in Vermont for the first time. Harold had gotten a job for the summer at Camp Keewaydin on Lake Dunmore, and, unbeknownst to Sharon, he'd signed her up to work in the office at the camp.

Sharon was not pleased when she found out, Harold recalls. Not pleased,



**Harold Strassner, site supervisor for Habitat, at the current house site in Cornwall.**

that is, until she met the legendary, and legendarily endearing, Keewaydin director Alfred "Waboos" Hare. "He twisted her around his little finger, the way he did everybody else," Harold says.

Harold, now site supervisor for Habitat for Humanity of Addison County, had a teaching job waiting for him back in Maryland, but before the summer was over, he and Sharon had made a decision: Vermont was the place for them. Harold got a job working for the Middlebury school district, and was a teacher and coach at the high school and junior high for 13 years.

While working for the school district, he and fellow teacher Mark Mooney built houses together in the summer, something Harold loved to do. Then an opportunity arose to work with Bill Murray and the carpentry crew at Middlebury College, and Harold made the move. He worked at Middlebury for the next 28 years, retiring at age 66.

"I had a blast at Middlebury College," Harold says. "I had the perfect job. In carpentry, you go out and meet all these people. ... I never had to sit in the office. I was always out on the campus, meeting people."

Habitat for Humanity of Addison County has been taking advantage of Harold's commitment to the community, work ethic, love of people, and wealth of experience for more than five years now. As site supervisor, he oversees just about everything that happens with each Habitat home, from pouring the foundation to the final trim, managing volunteers to working with architects.

When a Habitat house is under construction, "Wednesday is the big day," says Harold, "when a bunch of us retirees come in, from up in Starksboro, down in Brandon, and out in Shoreham, from all over the county. So we have a pretty good group on Wednesdays." There is usually another workday on Saturdays during the construction season, which often attracts Middlebury College student volunteers.

"Without Harold, very simply we would have no houses," says Mickey Heinecken, president of the Habitat board, and a regular at the work sites. "His dedication to Habitat is absolutely amazing. Not only does he have to oversee volunteers who quite often have limited building background, but



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**Habitat for Humanity of Addison County,**  
*founded 1999*

**Mail:** P.O. Box 1217  
Middlebury, VT 05753

**Phone:** 802.388.0400

**E-mail:** [habitat.addison@yahoo.com](mailto:habitat.addison@yahoo.com)

**Website:** [www.addisonhabitat.org](http://www.addisonhabitat.org)

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he ensures that the final product meets the highest standards."

Harold characteristically deflects the praise from himself and toward others, and the volunteer ethic in his adopted state of Vermont. "There are a lot of hard workers on our projects," he says. "The Habitat crews are great, and they're really enthusiastic."



Habitat for Humanity of Addison County  
Post Office Box 1217  
Middlebury, Vermont 05753

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## 'A place to build memories': Catching up with Dwayne and Hilary

A few years back, Dwayne Vukolder and Hilary Hulst heard from Dwayne's foster mom about buying a house through Habitat for Humanity. They were renters, and weren't sure their dream of home ownership would ever come true, given their financial challenges in the past.

But they decided to give it a try, and put some serious work into strengthening their credit rating. Before too long, they learned they were eligible, and were working with the Habitat crew on their new home on Weybridge Street in Middlebury.

They moved in four years ago, and live there now with their two kids, Bella, 9,



**Christopher, Hilary, Bella and Dwayne at their Weybridge Street home.**

and Christopher, 12, both students at Mary Hogan School.

The location is tough to beat, Dwayne and Hilary say, close to downtown but with Otter Creek Park right in the backyard. And the house itself, thanks to Habitat, comes with an affordable mortgage payment, and is easy to heat in the winter and cool in the summer.

Dwayne is a chef and a builder of custom mountain bikes ("a bike geek

and proud of it") and Hilary is family docket clerk at the Addison County Superior Court. They've been together for 11 years, and Dwayne says the Habitat for Humanity opportunity came along exactly when they needed it. "It opened up a door that improved our quality of life,"

Dwayne says.

Says Hilary, "Home ownership means a new chapter in our lives, a fresh new start, safety and security. It's our safe haven and our comfort zone, a place to build memories. I'm forever grateful for this program."

For his part, Dwayne has become an ambassador for Habitat, talking it up with prospective homeowners. "It's a terrific program," he says, "full of great folks who just want people to achieve their dreams. That's something the world could use more of."