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Habitat CEO praises Wichita affiliate's work

BY JOE RODRIGUEZ
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The president and chief executive of Habitat for Humanity International on Thursday praised its Wichita affiliate's plans for building more than 60 houses over the next three years.

Jonathan Reckford, in Wichita to speak at the local Nonprofit Chamber of Service's annual luncheon, also encouraged nonprofit leaders to collaborate more on community initiatives and to maintain their "burning passion" to serve people.

During his speech to about 150 people at the Hyatt Regency Wichita, Reckford shared his excitement about Wichita Habitat for Humanity's plans to build 61 homes -- including 16 this year -- through 2010.

"They're going to almost match what they've done in the history of Wichita Habitat in the next three or four years," said Reckford, noting that the local organization has built 87 homes so far. "That's what exponential growth looks like, and that's great."

In the local Habitat program, people who may not have otherwise been able to buy a home get to purchase a new home with a 20-year, zero-interest mortgage. A typical monthly payment, including taxes and insurance, is about \$350.

People selected as Habitat residents are required to perform "sweat equity" -- volunteering on other Habitat homes -- and to attend classes on money management and home maintenance.

Often, the Habitat resident's payment is much less than rent, according to Linda Stewart, executive director of Wichita Habitat for Humanity.

And the benefits come in other ways, she said. Because homeowners aren't moving around, they find time to do things such as further their education and their children perform better in school.

Habitat for Humanity -- the seventh-largest nonprofit organization in the U.S. -- has built nearly 300,000 homes. The organization built homes for nearly 50,000 families last year.

But Reckford said there's still plenty of work to do, telling people that 37 million people in the U.S. live in poverty.

He thanked the people attending the luncheon -- most representing local nonprofit agencies -- for their efforts in making a difference in people's lives, and asked them to consider collaborative efforts.

He raised a question that a girl in Mexico who was getting a Habitat house once asked him: "Why are you here?"

"I would just challenge you on those hard days... keep that burning passion to see that change in this community, in this country and in this world."

Reach Joe Rodriguez at 316-268-6644 or jrodriguez@wichitaeagle.com.

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