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NEWS

September 2023




Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity's newest partner family celebrates the surprise announcement at the West Springfield administrative office.

Welcome to GSHFH, Driss, Majda, and family

Driss and Majda are one step closer to reaching the essence of the American dream. In July, the Moroccan couple with their four children, accepted the opportunity to partner, build, and purchase their first home

through Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH). The family applied in the January-through-March homeownership application cycle. After months of interviews, a home assessment,

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Newest NCCC River 4 team comes to GSHFH for first assignment

They sit side by side bantering with one another, laughing about inside jokes – including their newly-pierced septums – and conversing about the program that introduced the roommates to each other and to Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH). Eighteen-year-olds Carmen Velez Haywood, of Newton, and Anya Simsic, of Yorktown, Virginia, are two of 11 young adults stationed in Western Massachusetts representing AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC)'s Southern Region. Better known as the “River 4” team, the youth, who range in age from 18 to 26, live and work in the community. For their GSHFH assignment, they are staying at the Springfield College dorms and spending their days volunteering primarily at build sites, assisting the construction crew.

For many of them, the choice to join the national service program is an opportunity to travel around the United States, engage in new and selfless opportunities, and figure out what they would like to pursue for a career. For Carmen and Anya, joining AmeriCorps gave them the much-needed break from academia. Both have opted for a “gap year” after high school, and plan to attend college upon completion of the 10-month commitment.

“I like Habitat a lot. The staff



Top: AmeriCorps NCCC Southern Region's River 4 team stands outside Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity's (GSHFH) West Springfield administrative office building. Above: River 4 teammates Anya Simsic (left) and Carmen Velez Haywood work together to build an IKEA cabinet for the newest GSHFH home under construction in Holyoke.

is kind and generous and the construction team is willing to share, teach, put us on the right track, and always make sure we get the job done

right,” said Carmen of the team’s first assignment since NCCC training in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Carmen is a self-

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Volunteer of the Month



Sunrun Solar in Chicopee

This past summer, some 40 Sunrun employees ventured to Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity's (GSHFH) Holyoke build site to participate in four volunteer days. Better known as “Corporate Builds,” the staffers worked with the GSHFH construction crew to help construct the newest home. While on site, volunteers poured footings and built the front and back decks.

Longmeadow's Francisco Martinez; Gabe Marchetti, of Springfield; and Dave Meiler, of Whately, are among those who participated. All said it was their first time on a Habitat build site and hope to return.

“Not only was it a great way to support our community, but we had the opportunity to impact someone's life in a huge way,” said Francisco. “I will not forget to mention the staff. They are very knowledgeable and safe. It was a pleasure to work alongside them all.”

Dave agreed.

“I learned how the soon-to-be homeowners also have to put in sweat equity, which I think is such a beautiful thing to be a part of,” Dave said. “A good home is where life starts, where you can put down roots, and share the love.”

Gabe said his biggest takeaway was connecting with people who enjoyed working on the project as much as he did, knowing a family will benefit from it.

“The workout is more than worth it for your individual part and you will get to sit back in your car at the end of the day of service and say, ‘I wish I could do that more often.’”

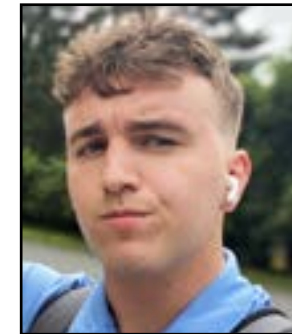
In their own words ...



Francisco Martinez of Longmeadow

What advice would you give someone thinking about volunteering at GSHFH? I wouldn't say hit the gym before, but a nice stretch goes a long way.

If you were reincarnated as a famous person, who would you want to be and why? Nipsey Hussle. He made such a huge impact. I feel if he was still around and blew up like he did with his death, he would have started a bigger movement for minority groups.



Gabe Marchetti of Springfield

What advice would you give someone thinking about volunteering at GSHFH? Be receptive and humble to learn about things you might not have known prior.

Reality TV. Love it or hate it? Hate (dislike) it.

What was your favorite childhood game? Mouse Trap

If all the superheroes went to battle against each other, who do you think would win? Iron Man, for sure.



Dave Meiler of Whately

What advice would you give someone thinking about volunteering at GSHFH? Don't be afraid, there is a job there for all types of people. You don't need to be a pro.

Reality TV. Love it or hate it? Hated it, but my wife has me watching some wedding shows, which are hilarious.

If all the superheroes went to battle against each other, who do you think would win? Captain Planet

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a volunteer build day on the Holyoke site, and reviewing the application, which included personal and financial documents, the family accepted an invite to the West Springfield administrative office. There, the family learned they qualified. They were selected from a group of eight suitable families.

“When we received the email saying we had to meet you in the office to discuss the decision that was made, we suspected you chose our family for homeownership,” said Driss, the patriarch who works as a truck driver, while his wife Majda cares for the children. “We thought if we weren’t chosen, you would just give us a phone call or email us.”

Driss, Majda, and their four children who range in age from 6 months to 11 years, immigrated to Western Massachusetts from Morocco in November 2018. Driss said they came via a lottery diversity program in hopes of discovering a new country and gaining more opportunities.

The family had lived in a house in West Springfield until a car crashed into the home causing structural damage. It was condemned and the family was moved to a tiny two-bedroom apartment in the same town. The girls, who are 8- and 11-years old, share one bedroom, while the Driss, Majda, and the two youngest boys share the other bedroom.

“They’re crammed tighter than sardines,” said



Majda (left) and Driss sit in the Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity administrative office shortly after learning they’ve been selected to partner with the nonprofit organization.

Olga Kravchenko, GSHFH Homeowner Programs coordinator.

Driss said because the rent is too expensive and the apartment is too small, they applied to the Greater Springfield Habitat homeownership program after learning about it from a friend.

“We applied through your program to get a home so that our children would have a better life,” Driss said. “My dream is for my children to be good people and useful to society and do good deeds for the environment and achieve their dreams.”

The location of the next home has not yet been decided. Ideally, the family hopes to stay in West Springfield where they’ve begun to plant roots. Ultimately, they hope to have four bedrooms, two floors, a nice backyard for the kids to do their hobbies “because this will be the permanent home of the family,” Driss said.

Going forward, Driss, Majda will be required to complete 500 hours of sweat equity – volunteer hours on the construction site and/or at other organization-sponsored events; and complete financial education classes.

Olga said she’s excited for the family and the path ahead of them. After all, she can relate. As an immigrant who came to Western Massachusetts from Ukraine as a child, achieving the American homeownership dream is not easy.

“I’ve owned my own home for three years. As an immigrant, I had to overcome the language barrier and other assimilations. I had to work really hard to get to the end goal,” she said. “I love seeing their effort. It reminds me of my own effort and I want their kids to have a good backyard to play in without a grumpy landlord telling them they can’t.”

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proclaimed city girl who grew up in the boroughs of New York City before moving to Eastern Massachusetts two years ago. “It’s a great organization and it focuses on the community’s needs. Plus, they frame a house based on a family’s needs – it’s God-like, an act of love.”

The River 4 team begins their workdays between 6:30 and 7:15am, leaving the dorms at 7:30am. They work until 4pm, and have dinner as a group at 5:30pm.

The NCCC team’s days also include structured group physical training and work for their individual specialty roles. Each member of the group has one and they include reaching

out to local media outlets to educate them on NCCC, or service learning initiatives, such as conducting research to understand how their service impacts the communities they’re in. Their nights end with downtime. Members have said they read, watch movies, play card games, go for walks and make jam with foraged berries, or scroll through the social media apps on their mobile phones.

Anya said she learned of AmeriCorps as a freshman in high school. A senior named Chrissy had enrolled in the program after graduation. Anya followed her social media and was impressed by what she

saw. She soon did her own research and expected the program to be structured like a military boot camp. Anya said she was pleasantly surprised when she discovered the program is an opportunity for self-growth and practicing conflict management.

“I love the work that we do for Habitat. I feel so accomplished. Putting up the drywall makes the house look like a house and feel like a home for someone. I’m sore when I get home, but

the physical work is the easiest part of the program,” said Anya, who deferred her acceptance into Virginia’s James Madison University where she plans to study biology with a focus in mycology (mushrooms).

“It’s tough to follow versus lead. In high school, I had a lot of leadership roles, but not in AmeriCorps. It’s like going from the driver of the bus to sitting in the back seat.”

The River 4 team leaves Springfield on Sept. 14 and ventures to Frostburg, Maryland, their next destination to build 4.75 miles of walking trails.

“AmeriCorps programming offers many different levels of volunteerism and support to GSHFH. We have had an AmeriCorps National member working with us since January, and now the NCCC team,” said Aimee Giroux, GSHFH executive director. “The NCCC teams have to learn how to

manage living and working together for 10 months in multiple locations, which is not always easy. Every team is different, and we enjoy getting to meet these young adults, working with them to learn construction skills, and supporting them in their commitment to community service.”

“
They frame a house based on a family’s needs – it’s God-like, an act of love.
- Carmen Velez Haywood, AmeriCorps NCCC Southern Region River 4 team



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