

Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity

SOCKS FOR SALE

Mayor Domenic Sarno
Springfield, MA

habitatspringfield.org/
fancy-footwork

Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity®

NEWS

June 2022

Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity

Help us June 25

10am-1pm

Bring your clean, empty aluminum cans to:
E. Longmeadow High School
180 Maple St,
E. Longmeadow

habitatspringfield.org | (413) 739-5503

GSHFH celebrates newest homeowners at dedication

Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity

A Habitat home is more than just a house. Make a difference. Donate today.

HOME SWEET HOME



Photo credit: Marie Ciosek

Soon-to-be homeowner Natasha stands with her two sons near the Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity home that she will purchase later this month.

**Save the date:
Friday, July 15
Double dedication event in Holyoke.**

Details to follow.

On May 23, Natasha and her boys were one step closer to moving into their newly-built Springfield home. On that day, the family, with Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) staffers, board members, and volunteers, celebrated the completion of construction with a dedication ceremony. More than 35 people attended the event in the backyard of the two-story Bay Street home.

more than 150 volunteers from local companies, the military, and school groups helped complete the project. They include PeoplesBank, MGM Springfield, OMG, Sunbelt Rentals, Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy, and Springfield College Habitat for Humanity Collegiate Chapter.

“Habitat for Humanity, this is really God’s work you’re doing,” said Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno. “Many times, in our urban

Construction for the home began in Spring 2021. Since that time,

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Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity

Daughter of Calif. Habitat homeowner becomes her best self; Gives to GSHFH

Jai Kensey said she knew early on she wanted a different life than the one she lived. Today, she's living that life and giving back to the community that showed her kindness. As the director of Social Impact at Green Thumb Industries (GTI) in Chicago, her team recently donated \$15,000 to Greater Springfield Habitat for Humanity (GSHFH) and a local GTI affiliate is planning a corporate build day at one of our Holyoke sites.

Jai (pronounced J-eye) credits her outlook and lifestyle choices with the benevolence she saw as a child when her family had been selected as a Habitat for Humanity partner family.

"Habitat for Humanity can change lives," said Jai, 41. "You can directly see how this bridge raised the wealth gap in communities of color. For folks who dream of home ownership, it's attainable through Habitat. Not only are you able to purchase a first home, but you're able to be a part of the process, which creates a sense of pride."

Before Habitat helped the family, Jai said her life had been drastically different. By 10 years old, she had already moved multiple times between various apartments in Southern California and her grandmother's home in Pomona, California. The accommodations Jai's mother found were often situated in less desirable neighborhoods than her grandma's house. Jai saw drugs, alcohol, crime, and violence on the streets. Inside the apartments, Jai, her older sister, and their mother faced pests and eviction notices. Additionally, Jai and her older sister were latchkey kids. To give her children



Jai Kensey (left), her mother and sister pose in the driveway of their Habitat home in Ontario, California.

a better future, Jai's mother worked as a certified nursing assistant on overnight shifts with a two-hour commute each way.

While Jai said her childhood wasn't all terrible and there were moments of happiness, she does recall the instability and insecurity. She remembers trying to become someone she wasn't as a means of survival. Specifically, she said she remembers finishing all of her homework at school so her neighbors in the apartment building wouldn't see her as a nerd.

Then, Jai said, her childhood changed when she and her mom were selected as a Habitat for Humanity partner family. Jai and her mom moved into their new home in Ontario, California, just a few miles down the road from Jai's grandmother, as Jai started her freshman year of high school. Jai's sister, who is eight years older, had already moved out on her own.

"I remember us being really excited and my mom feeling that sense of accomplishment that she

was doing something positive for her daughters," said Jai. "I bet those volunteers don't realize the work they put into that home that day and how it has impacted the family that lives there for decades beyond that moment. My mom still lives in that house.

"Moving into that house helped me reach that full potential rather than becoming someone I'm not," Jai said. "I feel so badly for kids in inner cities who are stuck and feel ashamed of how smart they are, the big ideas they have, or how they talk because of their circumstances and their inability to get out of it."

Jai's mother purchased a small salmon-colored two-bedroom home with white trim, green grass, a long driveway, and garage, which Jai said was only used for storage. "It never dawned on me that the house was small," Jai said with a laugh.

With a newfound sense of security, Jai and her mom hosted holiday dinners, Super Bowl parties,

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SPOTLIGHT ON

Rachel Leahey
GSHFH carpenter
of Hampden, MA



How long have you been a part of the GSHFH team? 3 months

Why did you want to work for GSHFH? I had volunteered before I applied for the position. I enjoyed the atmosphere and knew I could learn a lot working for Habitat.

What do you hope to accomplish in your position? I hope to learn as much as I can and gain a lot of different skills.

Where do you see yourself in five years? I hope to be looking to buy/build my first house and begin to create the small farm I've always dreamed of having.

If you were a state, which one would you be? New Hampshire because "Live free or die" is something I truly believe in.

Can you say your ABCs backward? Yes, but very slowly. I have to think about it.

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centers, some media will depict negativity. This is the good; the beautiful mosaic in the city of Springfield. You all represent that today. We are so happy to welcome you here to Bay Street and I wish you and your family good health."

Jim Sherbo, PeoplesBank senior vice president, agreed and encouraged Natasha to pay it forward and give back to the community. He suggested she get involved with the neighborhood and school system and the avenues that led her to purchasing a home through Habitat for Humanity. "Our communities will be better for it," he said.

Natasha, a single mother with two boys, initially applied for GSHFH Homeownership Program in 2016. Although her application was approved, the family was not selected. She applied again in January 2020. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the application process closed early. In August 2020, Natasha applied for a third time. Two months later, Natasha learned she and her boys were selected as a new partner family.

Natasha's current home situation is dire at best. The heating, plumbing, and electrical wiring are all faulty. There's a smell to the water, which they won't use for brushing teeth, drinking, or cooking. The apartment houses bugs, mold, and mice. The radiators in the bedrooms don't work and during the winter, the family sleeps in the third-floor laundry room to keep warm. Natasha's car has been broken into twice and there was even a shooting across the street.

Thanks to GSHFH, the family won't have to wait any longer. Natasha closed on her home June 10.



Photo credit: Marie Ciosek

Top: A picture of Natasha's soon-to-be new home.

Above: Natasha's oldest son holds the keys to the new house and his younger brother looks on. Natasha stands to the far right.

"This has been an amazing journey. It's been a fun, emotional year-and-a-half. I've gotten to meet a lot of amazing people and I'm just grateful for everything," Natasha said. This is something we have been waiting for and we're just excited to get in and enjoy it."

To learn more about the homeownership program, go to habitatspringfield.org/how-to-apply

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family get-togethers, and barbecues. Jai said she left for prom, her first job, and college from that house. Her mom, who's now retired, can often be found sitting on the front stoop talking to her neighbors.

"We have so many family memories and milestone events there," Jai said. "Even though it's a tiny house, we made the best of it. It's ours."

As time ticked on, Jai said she soon began thinking about college as a way to change her fate. She wanted a different and better future than how her mother earned a living. Jai researched scholarships, filled out financial aid applications, and spoke with a teacher who encouraged her to pursue writing. Soon, she was accepted to a school in Georgia. Her mother and grandmother rented a van, drove her across the country, and Jai set out for her new future.

Following a school transfer and juggling three jobs, plus internships and school loans to pay for her education, Jai graduated. She said she borrowed as little money as possible from her grandmother and set a goal to have eight internships by graduation to ensure she'd have a job and not have to rely on her grandmother's financial help.

Jai said she worked roughly 20 years in public relations before becoming the director of Social Impact at Green Thumb Industries. In the director position, Jai leads the philanthropic effort to help those impacted by the war on drugs. She works with volunteers and nonprofits that help communities affected by incarceration and low-level cannabis charges.

A year ago, Jai said she bought her first home, a duplex-down condominium, in Chicago's historic district of Bronzeville. Jai said she realized it was important for her 3-year-old son Andrew to have the

sense of security that she gained when she moved into a Habitat home.

GTI Social Impact Manager Alyssa Estrada said when she interviewed with Jai for her current job, she was drawn to Jai's authenticity and intentionality.

"She's transparent and honest," Alyssa said. "She wants to amplify the work other nonprofits are doing. She's a game changer. It's life changing to have this job and Jai as a boss. She allows me to be my most authentic self."

After Alyssa learned about Jai's background, she said it was additionally meaningful to partner with a Habitat affiliate close to the RISE West Springfield store. Furthermore, Alyssa said she was impressed by GSHFH's willingness to accept a donation from a cannabis business and its use of Hempitecture HempWool thermal insulation in the construction of new homes.

"Greater Springfield Habitat is one of the first chapters to partner with GTI. The universe brought us together," Alyssa said. "Greater Springfield Habitat is just open, responsive, awesome, and showcasing the different uses of cannabis. They are destigmatizing the negativity."

Aimee Giroux, GSHFH executive directory, agreed.

"GSHFH is happy to partner with local industries that want to help create a positive impact in the communities where they operate," she said. "The donation for GTI along with their volunteer support allows us the opportunity to install HempWool insulation, which is a USDA-certified biobased green building product, into two homes. This product provides excellent insulation while also being naturally pest and mold resistant, non-toxic, and volatile organic compounds (VOC) free, creating a better living environment for the family and helping GSHFH build a



The family's Habitat for Humanity home in Ontario, California.



Jai's mother cooking a holiday meal at the family's Habitat house in Ontario, California.

greener sustainable home."

In 2021, Liberty's Affinity Medical Marijuana dispensary in West Springfield joined the Green Thumb team and recently opened as RISE West Springfield.

"The more work we can do with impactful organizations, the better. Part of the reason I love being in the cannabis industry is the culture of giving back," said Ben Sussman, GTI Northeast Region Retail Marketing manager. "I did not know Jai grew up in a Habitat house, however, that's amazing. I love hearing about the real-life impact that organizations such as Habitat have."