

From one homeowner to another: Feel the joy

By Teresa K. Weaver

Seventeen years ago, Sonia Street got a hand up. Thanks to the 1992 Carter Work Project in the Sandtown area of Baltimore, Maryland, she moved her family from public housing into a rehabilitated row house. Today, she is hard at work in Chiang Mai, Thailand, building a home for Pubadin Chatpaisarn and his family.

"I want him to have joy in his heart like the joy I got 17 years ago," Street said. "The Carter project changed my life. Without Jimmy and Rosalynn, I don't know where I would be."

Street, once a small-time drug dealer, was living in public housing in 1992, struggling to make a decent home for herself and her three daughters: 9-year-old Denise Perry and twin 7-year-olds Tamika and Tyesha. She remembers the time and date she met the Carters: 8 a.m., June 17.

"Getting out of there—out of public housing—had a big impact," she said. "I can't even describe the joy I feel every day that I don't have to worry about crime and all those other things. To have a safe place to live means everything."

Street's girls are grown women now: Her oldest, now 27, works for the Habitat affiliate and just became a Habitat homeowner herself. One of the 25-year-old twins works for the city health department, and the other takes care of disabled and elderly people.

"God has just been blessing me," Street said.

In all the years since the 1992 Carter project, Street has been an active disciple of Habitat for Humanity. She has helped build houses in Seoul, South Korea; in South Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; and Los Angeles, California. In June, she will pay off her mortgage—an occasion she would like to share with the people who made it possible.

"I've written Jimmy a letter asking him to come back to Sandtown in Baltimore and help us build," she said. "I'm hoping to get a chance to give him the letter before Friday."

Street is the building manager for New Song Community Church, which is affiliated with Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. All the skills she learned on the build site 17 years ago serve her well in her everyday duties.

"I learned how to do things on my own," Street said. "That's a good feeling."

On the Chiang Mai build site, Street moves nimbly among the rebar and concrete blocks. She earned her air fare here by selling dinners, baby-sitting, asking for donations, "whatever it took," she said.

"I needed to be here for Jimmy Carter," she said. "That's my boy! He is my mentor in life. I promised him 17 years ago that I would do whatever I could to help others. I promised him, and I'm here."

Teresa K. Weaver is a senior writer/editor at Habitat for Humanity International.



Longtime Habitat homeowner Sonia Street of Baltimore, Maryland, U.S. in Chiang Mai, Thailand, volunteers for another Carter Work Project. *Photo by Habitat for Humanity/Gregg Pachkowski*