



# Los Angeles Firms Contribute "Buildable Hours" to Habitat for Humanity

by Deanna M. Wilkinson

Every summer many of us on the employer side try to find that perfect community project for our attorneys and summer associates to participate in during our summer programs. This year, the Los Angeles community was introduced to Habitat for Humanity's Buildable Hours program. For those seeking a similar project for upcoming summers, here is how the Los Angeles community was able to get involved.

In the spring, law firms throughout the city were contacted by Manny Abascal, a partner in the Los Angeles office of Latham & Watkins LLP, to assess whether or not they would be interested in joining a Buildable Hours Program in Los Angeles. Abascal received an immediate and favorable response and the program was launched. On May 31, 2003, representatives from 21 law firms in Los Angeles gathered and broke ground for the first annual Los Angeles Buildable Hours program.

Buildable Hours is a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., founded in 2002 by Roger Goldman, a partner in the Washington, D.C., office of Latham & Watkins, and Scott Michel, a partner in the Washington, D.C., firm of Caplin & Drysdale. The program's purpose is to pool time, labor, and financial resources from the legal community and work in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity to build affordable housing for deserving, low-income families.

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This summer, the program expanded to include New York City and Los Angeles.

Building a house is expensive: It costs about \$100,000 to erect the home. Buildable Hours relies exclusively on contributions from local law firms to make the program work. Each firm donates approximately \$5,000 (a tax-deductible donation) and, in return, is assigned a "build day" to contribute to the house's construction.

For firms in Los Angeles, the program was offered at the perfect time of year when firms were able to schedule the build day to serve as a community service project for their summer program. Summer associates were enthusiastic to participate in the project. Not only did it give them a chance to contribute to a great cause, but it also provided an opportunity to become acquainted with their co-workers in a different setting. To prevent overcrowding on the site, each build day was designed to accommodate a maximum of 20 participants. (This number varies depending on the size of build sites in different cities and/or locations within a build city.) Firms with smaller summer programs extended the opportunity to volunteer

to the office staff, thus building camaraderie throughout the office. Those with larger offices and summer classes scheduled several build days so that as many people as possible could contribute their time. The 21 participating law firms were:

- Allen Matkins Leck Gamble & Mallory LLP
- Alschuler Grossman Stein & Kahan LLP
- Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP
- Baker & Hostetler LLP
- Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP
- Greenberg Glusker Fields Claman Machtlinger & Kinsella LLP
- Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe LLP
- Jones Day
- Kirkland & Ellis LLP
- Latham & Watkins LLP
- Loeb & Loeb LLP
- Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw LLP
- McKenna Long & Aldridge LLP
- Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP
- Mitchell, Silberberg & Knupp LLP

- Morrison & Foerster LLP
- Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP
- O'Melveny & Myers LLP
- Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP
- Sidley Austin Brown & Wood LLP
- Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Floom LLP

Before the project began, Habitat for Humanity identified the family in need of a new home. The Guzman family was selected by satisfying the following criteria: (1) Their current housing was inadequate because of overcrowding or substandard health or safety factors; (2) The family's gross income was within certain income guidelines; (3) The family had a history of financial responsibility, steady income, and the ability to make monthly payments; and (4) They supplied credit references. Once a family meets these standards and is selected, there are additional requirements for them to fulfill prior to scheduling a move-in date. Family members are obligated to make a downpayment of 1% of the purchase price and contribute between 300-400 hours of "sweat equity," which means they are part of the team that helps build their future home.

The house's construction is managed by

Habitat for Humanity. It is built over the course of three months, with the law firm teams supervised and instructed by Habitat for Humanity professionals. Prior to ground-breaking, each firm is required to send a representative (usually the recruiting manager) to an orientation class, where Habitat for Humanity and Buildable Hours staff provide direction on what is expected prior to and on a typical build day. That representative then returns to his or her firm and conducts an informational meeting for the volunteer team. Most of the requirements were obvious. Show up on time. Wear thick-soled shoes, work gloves, and sun-block. Make sure to drink plenty of water throughout the day. There was one unexpected rule though — no operating cell phones on the construction site, the rationale being that if you're talking on the phone you're likely not paying attention to your surroundings and may get hurt. A practical request, but in a city like Los Angeles or in a day in the life of a lawyer, no access to a cell phone can indeed be the ultimate sacrifice.

The building began immediately after the ground-breaking ceremony. Firms that scheduled their build day in the early part of the summer were designated to assemble

the frame of the house or raise the walls. Throughout the build, Habitat for Humanity maintained the construction timeline and notified firms each week as to what tasks their team would perform on their build day. The tasks are designed so that people with no prior experience in building can still contribute their time and labor. Jobs range from simply painting an interior room to more difficult tasks such as shingling the roof. Regardless of one's knowledge of power tools or paint, there is something for everyone to do.

Three months later, the Los Angeles home was completed on schedule. On August 2, 2003, with representatives present from the media, every participating law firm, and the Habitat for Humanity staff, the Guzman family was given keys to their new home. . . . A home that will improve the lives and lifestyles of the Guzmans. . . . A home that would not have been possible without the Buildable Hours program and the dedication and efforts of the Los Angeles legal community.

If you are interested in learning more about Habitat for Humanity's Buildable Hours program, please visit [www.buildablehours.com](http://www.buildablehours.com) for additional information. ■

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