

Wong Leads Habitat for Humanity On to New Horizon

By Camila Castellanos
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Pandemic fallout may have hampered San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity's ambitious mission to help more residents achieve home ownership amid soaring housing costs, but it has reawakened from the COVID slumber with a new leader at the helm and ready to launch full speed ahead.

Executive Director Bryan Wong, a longtime area resident who was

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born and bred in a town bordering San Marino, took the reins at Habitat one year ago and has big plans on the horizon. But first, he'd like to set the record straight, starting with what you might know about Habitat for Humanity.

"We do not give away houses for free," said Wong, laughing, as he sat down to eagerly discuss his new goals for SGVHH. "We do not build houses for free. It is not a lottery, and Jimmy Carter is not involved."

Although the first branch of Habitat for Humanity was established in Georgia, and former President Jimmy Carter is an avid supporter, some have created the urban misnomer involving all of the above, much to Wong's chagrin.

To be clear, the San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity is a multi-tiered nonprofit that helps families achieve first-time home ownership and financial stability through alternative funding options and lower-interest resources. Families pay back the mortgages like any traditional home pur-

chase, but receive support along the way through financial advice and education, including how to maintain a budget.

The SGVHH also provides low-interest loans for home upgrades and repairs, which can allow a family to grow in place or keep the elderly safe as they age.

Currently, the nonprofit is more than halfway to its three-year, \$28 million campaign that will help 100 families here, and abroad, build or repair their very own place to call home. Since 2021, SGVHH has served 57 families and has an exciting pipeline of new housing on the way or already in progress in Pasadena, Altadena, Azusa and Baldwin Park.

With expertise in the peripheral housing industry by way of banking, loans and mortgages, Wong is well-suited to expand the nonprofit's affordable-housing efforts by bringing a slate of creative funding formulas to the table.

He also wants to grow the conversation around what affordable housing means in a state where the home median price is \$849,000. Families getting priced out of what once were affordable neighborhoods mean those areas can fall victim to lower employment, struggling school districts, failing local businesses and services and, ultimately, city budgets.

"The need for housing, in particular affordable housing, across the San Gabriel Valley is staggering," Wong noted, direly. "Some of our cities face the danger of becoming retirement enclaves, because no young families can afford to live here. The trickle-down effect of that and how it impacts com-

munities is devastating."

For Wong, who grew up in South Pasadena and has raised a family with his wife in Monrovia, the mission for home ownership is personal. He has two young-adult sons, 24 and 25, who, though they've graduated from college and hold good jobs, cannot afford to live on their own without spending most of their earnings on rent.

Wong, who knows many young men and women in the community through his years of coaching youth sports, has spoken with countless others in the same position.

Data has shown that renters in Los Angeles County need to earn 2.5 times the minimum wage in order to afford the average housing cost, and 78% of extremely low-income households are paying more than half of their income on housing.

"My boys are what they call 'boomerangs' kids, meaning they have to come back home to live and save money. Realistically, though, even later, they will never be able to afford a house in the San Gabriel Valley without parental help," he said.

"When the people who grow up in this area, our best and brightest, when they can't afford to live here, that's a big problem for everyone. I see it as killing the very fabric of our communities," he added.

Wong is intent on finding innovative partnerships and expanding the housing conversation with planners and leaders across SGVHH's 31-city service area. After 17-plus years of serving on the Monrovia Unified School District Board, he's learned some hard lessons in finding middle ground.

"Expanding housing opportunities is in everybody's best interest; we have to do some important things to keep these families and communities thriving," he said. "In



partnering with cities and financial institutions and other organizations, we can find what funds are available, what land is available, and then maximize those resources for them. We are changing the way we are working with our homeowners, so it's not so reactive, by tweaking the system slightly to make the process more efficient."

Challenges lay in wait, of course, and, of which Wong is painfully aware. City permit backlogs combined with rising employment and supply costs, inflation, interest rates and building material shortages have hit the SGVHH on just about every level since the pandemic took hold.

The nonprofit organization's popular "Restores" program, which resells home goods, furniture and building materials at affordable prices, was forced to close for a short period during the pandemic, and the drop off in the nonprofit's volunteer base hit the organization hard as well.

Longtime SGVHH board member Scott Carpenter emphasized the impact of COVID-19 on Habitat.

"There is no doubt that the COVID pandemic had a significant impact on operations. Our Restores [was] initially closed and, like all businesses, we had to adapt so that we could provide a safe shopping experience as the pandemic continued. Construction worksites were also closed to volunteer groups for a period," Carpenter said, adding that the return of volunteers to work has been wonderful. "Our supporters, including individuals, businesses and foundations, continued to provide support and have been very enthusiastic as on-site activ-

ities resumed. We're thrilled to be able to welcome people back on site."

He said he is confident, however, in the SGVHH's ability to make up for any lost time under Wong's leadership, especially by creating more partnerships in the mission to expand housing.

"Bryan hit the ground running as he joined SGV Habitat, quickly assessed the status of our operational teams and helped to source needed resources," he added. "Each part of the team works very well together, allowing us to serve the most families that we can with the resources we have. And that's the point; to reach people and make a positive difference in their lives and community.

"Going forward, the success of these partnerships will help to bring the community together as more housing is created through greater participation. It has caught the attention of community leaders and legislators as they see that their actions and involve-

ment can make a difference. Partnerships can be a powerful tool for good."

Wong, himself, also sees only possibilities at SGVHH. A self-described optimist, he is eager to make relationships with city leaders to explore how the nonprofit can proactively help find new housing opportunities across the valley.

"Honestly, I think we are just at the very beginning of what we can do," he said. "There is a rare opportunity to get a lot of work done in the housing market today. This is the time because there's an awareness of how bad things are and there are solutions that we have for it. It's going to take some investment, but affordable housing is an investment, in the community and in the future."

The San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity is seeking volunteers, supporters and partnerships. To learn more, visit sgvhabitat.org.



Photo courtesy SGVHH

San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Bryan Wong, who was born and raised in South Pasadena, breaks out the tools in helping to construct a duplex at the corner of Howard Street and Navarro Avenue. Wong, who took over the nonprofit's leadership a year ago, is eager to create more partnerships to expand new housing opportunities across the valley.



Executive Director Bryan Wong recalled growing up in South Pasadena, where he graduated from high school in 1983, noting that the struggle for home ownership amid soaring costs is personal.



Photos courtesy SGVHH

San Gabriel Valley Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Bryan Wong (left) is pictured with supporters and partners at a groundbreaking ceremony for a new home in Altadena.