

# POWER PLAYERS

BY TOM MALM  
PHOTOS BY PETER GOURNIAK



## DR. CHRISTOPHER BENNICK

*CEO, Habitat for Humanity*

**T**here are times when Dr. Christopher Bennick sounds like an entrepreneur. At other times he sounds like a social worker. The CEO for Habitat for Humanity of the Lehigh Valley is, in fact, a strategic thinking land developer focused on helping families that deserve a break. Between entrepreneur and social worker Dr. Bennick owns a seamless melding of competencies, experiences and beliefs that have been perfect for leading the local Habitat affiliate. Once a grass-roots nonprofit on the verge of bankruptcy, the local Habitat is now a study for organizations of any kind to emulate. He talks about collaboration, continuous change, creative empowerment, and strategic planning processes in the real context of his organization's success. The core of his conversation focuses on the families that ultimately own Habitat-built homes and on the children that may otherwise not have a chance for success. The story about the man himself almost never sneaks into the dialog, but when it does it helps to understand his motivation. "I grew up poor. We didn't always have food. I had to wear my dad's socks for mittens. But, we always had a home." It isn't something on which he dwells, preferring instead to discuss the mission of Habitat. "Studies show that children that grow up in a stable home environment are more likely to stay in school. They have a place to do home work. They graduate. They're less likely to be involved in drugs, teen pregnancy and continued poverty. It is all tied to the home."

The leader of any nonprofit can talk about the values brought to the community, the volunteers, and its donors through their organization's work. Dr. Bennick would rather show you. "Other nonprofits have to say, 'This is what we're doing.' I don't have to explain it. You can come out and see it. It's not about building a low income housing project. It's about strengthening a community or renewing a neighborhood. Last year we built twelve homes in the worst economic downturn that the world has ever experienced. Our goal is to do the same thing this year." There are individual homes that have been built by Habitat throughout the Valley. Yet, the most profound example of the organization's potential is exemplified by its current work on Bethlehem's south side. "Over the last several years I have been working on this development. We raised funding and bought this parcel of land. It is approximately eighteen acres. Combined with several minor subdivisions nearby, it provides lots for forty houses. At the same time we preserved twelve acres of the mountainous wildlife. The south side community started around the 1890's when the steel started. As development worked its way up the mountain, they just built one street after another. In 1929, the majority of the building stopped." The Great Depression ended the construction. Habitat's development is actually completing parts of the original plan of 1929. It is happening at a time when other investments to revitalize Bethlehem's south side have brought a new casino, the entertainment complex and an industrial park. New jobs are arriving in the south side community while record unemployment cripples much of the country.

*"We provide an opportunity for people to live, work and recreate in their own city. That's called Smart Growth." For their development on Bethlehem's south side, Dr. Bennick and the local Habitat affiliate were recognized by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for visionary leadership in building community collaborations that support Smart Growth. "It is that concept that we are trying to duplicate in every city across the Valley." In fact, as work is being completed with the current development in Bethlehem, there are plans for a fifty-home development in Allentown and a block of homes in Easton.*

"I run a charity. But I also run a business." It is worth noting that in the interview transcript for this story, Dr. Bennick used a total of 7,062 words. He used the word "charity" only once. It's probably because his organization doesn't give handouts. If you are going to live in a Habitat-built home it won't be given to you. Families earn them through a combination of sweat-equity, instruction through required classes, mentoring,

engaging in community service, and ultimately paying back a mortgage. A family must be motivated to meet some very demanding qualifications before being considered for a home. "We select families on three criteria: need, the ability to pay and the willingness to partner. They cannot already own a home. They have to be in an income bracket that is below sixty-percent median income. We develop a partnership with them." Partnership, indeed. To receive a home the process usually takes a couple of years. There is a family selection committee that qualifies applicants for Board approval. If the Board approves them they are required to put in fifty hours before they are assigned a home. "To me, we are changing generations after generations of these children - we are changing their lives. We are breaking that cycle of dependency, poverty and the system in general." Dr. Bennick emphasizes one of the most important facts about the relationship between Habitat, the families they serve, and the homes they build. "This is a long term commitment to changing someone's life. We hold an interest-free mortgage. Our volunteers and donors dedicate their time and resources. Because of that, we have a vested interest in making every family in the program successful. We consider the homeowners our partners which is probably why, of the eighty-five or eighty-six homes we've delivered, we have had zero foreclosures."

When he first started with Habitat, Christopher Bennick did not appear to be the natural choice for the job. "I had a Masters in English Literature and had worked for the Bethlehem Police Department," he says. While at the police department he wrote a lot of grants and served on nonprofit boards which gave him a basic idea of how nonprofits operate. After retiring from the department, he offered the Habitat executive board a proposal. "I told them that I wanted to start a doctoral program in organizational leadership that would apply to running a non-profit." He convinced them that he could participate in a program in Sarasota, Florida that would entail intense weeklong on-campus courses in such areas as team management, leadership, communication, motivation and conflict resolution. Each course would be followed by a research project. "I told them that I would bring each back to the organization, look at our strategic plan, look at where we want to go, look at the different committee structures, and I would implement doctoral theories to improve efficiency and grow the organization. For his dissertation, Dr. Bennick researched leadership traits and high performance to determine why some Habitat for Humanity affiliates perform at a higher productivity level than others. "I studied the ten highest performing Habitats on the east coast. I flew to each of their locations, interviewed them, surveyed them, looked at how they ran things, and brought the good elements back to my executive team and said, 'Okay, how do we implement this here?'" Dr. Bennick also did post-doctorate executive education at Harvard Business School, studying non-profit management, community collaborations, and other areas that could add excellence to Habitat's performance of their mission.

A model for managing the Lehigh Valley's Habitat with a very low operating cost was developed by Dr. Bennick and the Executive Board. It calls for a very small, professional staff with the rest of the work done by volunteers serving on the various committees. There are about one-hundred-fifty core volunteers that work for the affiliate. "I like to call them 'teams,' but it's a committee structure. Once we forge our strategic plan, everything rolls into it. You have your five-year goals rolled into a one-year operational plan." If the goal is to build twelve homes, each team has its own individual goals that tie back to how that will be accomplished. Six months prior to building a house there is a lot of planning to be done. One team needs to recruit and process a specific number of family applications knowing only a few will qualify for the program. The funding has to be in place. The materials must be on schedule. The volunteer labor must be organized. If the bulldozer guy doesn't show up on schedule, you could have twenty volunteers who took off work standing around a build site unable to work. Each of these major functions are managed by one of the dozen or so teams. "We build in safeguards. We try to have backups for everything. In general, it's just contingency planning. Everything has three plans. If one fails you go right to the next plan." The local Habitat operates at a 90% efficiency rate—meaning only ten-percent if its financial resources go to the administration of the program. Charity Navigator, a national organization that ranks non-profits, places the local Habitat among the top ten-percent of all US non-profits. Dr. Bennick says to be nationally ranked is a bragging point only earned by leveraging the volunteer and professional staff's talents, skills and resources to achieve a common mission.

"Seven years ago we had two dilapidated crack houses and maybe a building lot or two. We now have close to fifty building parcels. When I first came on-board we refined our work processes, upgraded all

## POWER PLAYERS

our technology, and revamped our accounting system. We grew over four-hundred percent in five years while applying sound strategies and leadership theories. We are always looking ahead a couple of years to where we are going and strategizing how we are going to be able to develop it." Partnerships are formed with potential homeowners, with the volunteers that build the homes, with the teams that execute the strategic plan, and with the financial donors. "It's easy for me to say 'write me a check.' I don't want that," Dr. Bennick states. The strongest partnerships are the ones in which those who want to support the cause find something in the program that also helps them. "We have corporations that come out and use the build as a team building exercise. There's a whole learning process about working together as a team, doing something you have never done before, and feeling successful about it in the end. Or let's say you have a summer camp or a church group of kids. You could build a lesson into it—that some kids don't have homes. You could take pictures or build a slide show or a movie about Habitat. They could get together items to bring to a home dedication. Sometimes volunteers build flower boxes and everybody brings a plant for the family—so even the youth are involved at that level. For adults it doesn't matter what age they are. We have a whole group of retirees that volunteer on-site a couple times a week, every week of the year. It builds camaraderie amongst them. In the summertime when we have an accelerated blitz build, some of the elderly women like to make the food for the construction volunteers. There are also lawyers and CPA's donating their services. We actively engage everybody.

**WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR WAYS TO INVOLVE MORE PEOPLE. THIS COMBINED EFFORT ENABLES US TO BE SUCCESSFUL. WE HAVE SOME GREAT PEOPLE FROM SOME OF THE MAJOR CORPORATIONS ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN OUR MISSION. PEOPLE ARE MOTIVATED—NOT FOR MONEY—BUT TO COME OUT HERE AND CHANGE SOMEBODY'S LIFE OR TO MAKE A LEGACY INVESTMENT. I AM JUST TRYING TO BE A GOOD STEWARD OF EVERYBODY'S DESIRE TO DO THAT. I WATCH EVERY SINGLE NICKEL SO EVERYTHING IS AS EFFICIENT AS POSSIBLE."**

To some, "watching nickels" might be translated to mean producing a product that is just good enough to meet Habitat's mission to build "simple and affordable" homes. Yet, the spirit behind the volunteers that build Habitat homes is too powerful to let mediocre construction happen. "There was a big hurricane down in Florida years ago. The storm came though there and wiped out a bunch of homes. All of the Habitat homes remained standing. When Katrina happened, a lot of the Habitat homes in New Orleans didn't have much damage." Dr. Bennick says the reason these homes endured such catastrophic storms rolls back to the mindset of the volunteers who give their time. "The volunteers are so dedicated to building a good quality house that if you try to skimp corners that's like a sin to them. Everybody wants to hammer nails, so if it needs one nail, it probably has three." He says Habitat is no different than any other builder when it comes to inspections and approvals. Except, being a non-profit has allowed another partnership to develop. "The city not only gives funding for land, but they also help us

understand the approval process and get us through that. Maybe some of the inspectors come out a lot quicker because they know it's a blitz build and it's accelerated, but that's just another building partner that we have." Another participant to improving quality and increasing efficiency.

"I manage from a 'constant change management' theory. An organization, if it is constantly growing and improving its processes, in two years it will be a different organization. That means you have to bring new people, new talent on board. You have to identify where your weaknesses are and bring resources in to help. That means, as the organization changes you will have, by natural attrition and selection, new people in and other people out. We try to keep a balance between social worker types of volunteers that want to work directly with families, business people that understand business, finance, and how things work, and those people that don't care about those things but just want to build a house. If we get too many people on one side or the other we need to balance it out. It is about having good people in the organization—getting the right people on the bus." Once the "right people" are in place, the mission is carried out by self-managed work teams. It is a management style in which the people closest to the tasks require only a minimal level of direction and enjoy seeing their ideas contribute to something valuable. "This is how it works...they can go, 'Okay Chris, this is how I think I can do this task or accomplish this goal.' And I can say, 'Maybe tweak it this way and then run with it.' Now, that person isn't just doing a job. They're going, 'I get it. I'm part of the big picture. My idea is helping. It's working. And I'm running with it.' I call it 'performance-based leadership with creative empowerment.' A lot of non-profits do not do this. A lot of businesses do not do this either." It is a management philosophy based on inclusion. The strategic goals and objectives provide the framework for everyone's success. "Everyone can feel important and everyone can know they are part of the bigger plan. Everyone is paddling in the same direction." Teams of volunteers understand their responsibilities and how they tie to the bigger plan. "If a team isn't really aligned with the bigger plan you have to have a discussion, 'Listen, if you head in that direction you're not going to be able to accomplish this part of our plan. These are our goals.' Sometimes people are involved with non-profit because they want something different than the Board wants. But our mission is to build simple, affordable homes. You cannot have mission drift. You cannot have them doing things that are not focused on the plan, focused on what we have decided at an organizational level as to where we are headed. I can lead the organization but I cannot do that without the help of a lot of other smart people working in unison to effectuate the mission."

It's no surprise that Bennick's doctorate is of the Ed. D. variety. The educational component of his degree fits his coaching and mentoring leadership style. "A lot of times I use the words 'Continuous Process Improvement' or CPI, because a lot of the local corporations use that kind of theory. But isn't that just basic Peter Drucker? 'How do we do what we are already doing better?' I often have that discussion with my different teams. We are always trying to improve. It is not that we would be doing a bad job if we planned to build twelve houses this year and we only built ten. Or, if we only raised \$2 million. Or, if we only helped ten families or thirty kids. That is still success. But we must be strategic and continuously ask, 'How do we do it better next year?' That is how you create an atmosphere of continuous growth and continuous change. If people cannot get used to continuous change you cannot grow." Dr. Bennick once taught a seminar on change at the national conference. He talked about initially managing a \$500,000 budget and building three homes in a year—and over the next five years growing to raise \$2,000,000 annually so twelve homes could be built. He talked about how that necessitated adding 5,000 more volunteer opportunities into the process. "You think it is not change to grow?" he asked. "If you didn't change to grow you could never adapt or accommodate the needs of the bigger organization. You have to be willing to change, to learn. It is critical to growth. You have to continuously improve or you will stagnate."

There are elements in the national program that actually force growing affiliates to constantly recruit new volunteers and sponsors. "The good thing about the Habitat model is that it recommends not taking more than 'x-percent' of funding from any one source. If we were a quasi-government nonprofit agency that depended on a lot of money from the State, if the State ran out of money the programs would stop. Or if we were dependent on one wealthy donor, and that donor decided this year they want to give to another organization, our program stops. We do target marketing. We look at all of the different groups. We look at how they could be involved." Dr. Bennick is constantly monitoring each

segment of the community that supports his affiliate. "Whether they are individuals, corporations, churches, foundations, grant writing, or events, I'm just looking at 'How do we take a balanced approach to this.' How do we actively engage each segment of the community. We must ask ourselves, 'What is it that the city wants to see happening in their community? What do prominent individuals like to see in their particular city or the Valley? What is the motivation for a church or a corporation to be involved in our mission?' I craft a targeted strategy. Then I pass that concept onto the different teams in our organization and they run with it." Dr. Bennick says that understanding what is appealing to each unique segment of the community and how that fits the Habitat mission works to create solid, sustained partnerships. "When we look at our strategic plan or our business development and marketing plan, it is clear that there is a certain portion of the Lehigh Valley that understands that a larger group serving the entire Valley can be more efficient, have less overhead, be able to tackle problems on a larger scale and be able to leverage a greater amount of resources. Many politicians, business leaders and others approach planning this way. But there are also people that say, 'I care about center city Allentown,' or 'I care about Bethlehem,' or 'I really care about Easton and I'm focused on that—I really want what I do to go to this particular city or this particular area of the city.' There's nothing the matter with that. That's great. We are currently forming a leadership group that wants to do block building in Allentown—a coalition of people who are really Allentown-centric. We are looking to form a similar group in Easton. Those are new people who will come into the organization, they will bring other friends and they will have a lasting impact on their local community. The more you can have people from one of those groups on some other team that's looking at the bigger picture—that's even better. You cannot be successful without a variety of groups."

The Habitat mission is to construct a new future for needy families by providing the benefits of home ownership. "Our families are taking a proactive approach to helping their children have a better life. If we can get them a home through any other program, we serve as a referral source and help them into that program. But, typically our families are below subprime and cannot get a home any other way. Because of Habitat's work, a family with a combined total income of \$12 an hour can afford a new home. In this economy, we are successfully building homes for the most needy of children and families, we are changing their lives in a meaningful way, and we have had zero foreclosures. That is a great bragging point for our local Habitat. Not every affiliate can say that." The Lehigh Valley Habitat affiliate has also proven to be a great way for the community to come together to do good. The growth of the program, the success of the volunteers and their impact on the lives of more and more families is worth celebrating. "When we finish a house we dedicate it to the homeowner. We invite all the volunteers and the sponsors that helped build the home to a small ceremony. The kids are playing in the yard. The mom cries." When Bennick talks about it there's a crackle of emotion in his voice. "It's touching to witness this, to be part of it," he says. Dr. Christopher Bennick smiles. Sure, there are times he talks like a land developing entrepreneur with a restless vision for growth and expansion. Yet at other times, like when he talks about the presentation of a home to its new residents, he's just seems satisfied.

For more information on the Home Building Program or to donate, visit [www.HabitatLehighValley.org](http://www.HabitatLehighValley.org) or call 610-776-7737.

