

The B Plot *Coastal Habitat Director Looks Back Ahead of Retirement*

By **RICHARD VIRGILIO**

When Maureen Mulligan, executive director, Coastal Habitat for Humanity was a child living in Essex County, her parents inspired her to help senior-age neighbors by taking out their garbage. The gratitude Mulligan felt as a young girl influenced her lifetime commitment to helping others.

"For as long as I can remember my parents encouraged me to be aware of and help people," said Mulligan. "As I grew up, I could not stand to see the underprivi-

leged being taken advantage of. When it came time to choose a career, my path was clear. I worked with kids in the criminal justice system, women's health-care and now housing. Working with local families and individuals has been more fulfilling for me than it has for the people I have been fortunate enough to help. I still cry and become beside myself when we help someone realize the dream of home ownership. It feeds my soul."

Mulligan joined Coastal Habi-



Maureen Mulligan, executive director of Coastal Habitat for Humanity is retiring this month after 15 years serving the community.

tat as the charity's first formal employee 15 years ago when it was a small, quiet charity, and was determined to make long-term, community-changing impact in Southern Monmouth County. As she prepares to retire later this month, the organization is planning its 19th and 20th home dedications.

Over the years, Mulligan managed the expansion of Coastal Habitat to incorporate programs customized for the area, including Brush with Kindness (repairing and restoring the exteriors of properties), Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (rebuilding local communities block-by-block), Aging in Place (ensuring seniors and veterans remain in their homes), along with homeowner maintenance and financial education initiatives. Under her stewardship, the organization has directly impacted more than 900 local lives and indirectly thousands more.

"Looking back, one of the most outstanding moments for me was when we completed building out a Neptune block in 2004," said Mulligan. "To be able to have five families living in brand-new simple homes next to each other was one of the most exciting

things to witness. The families installed a basketball hoop at the end of the cul-de-sac and had block parties. Watching the children grow up in a safe, caring environment has been extremely fulfilling. Now, we are beginning to see the next generation family members come back to volunteer and make more change."

One of those five Neptune homes was part of the Women Build, another program Mulligan oversaw.

"A team of women raised every penny they needed to build that house for a single mom," said Mulligan. "It was really an amazing accomplishment and so inspiring."

In 2007, Mulligan oversaw the launch of the organization's ReStore thrift store. And after 10 years on Third Avenue, ReStore 2.0 – the next generation of curated furniture and building material shopping – will be opening later this month in a brand new, larger, climate-controlled space around the corner on Memorial Drive.

If you believe everything happens for a reason, then all of Mulligan's work and network-building prepared her for the key leadership position she held in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, in 2012. Along with overseeing Coastal Habitat's rebuilding efforts from Manasquan north to Asbury Park – ultimately helping 50 families – Mulligan served as President of the Monmouth County Long-Term Recovery Group where she helped coordinate a multi-level human services effort.

"When push comes to shove, people come together to help each other no matter what anyone may say or do to divide us," said Mulligan. "I saw neighbors helping neighbors from all backgrounds. A family that lost everything in the storm was more concerned with the mobility-challenged veteran who lived around the corner than the per-

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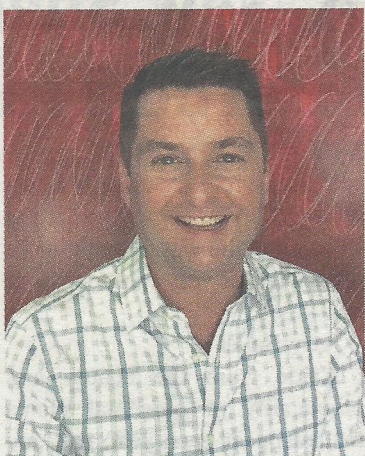


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sonal challenges they faced. I met a woman who drove from California, slept in a church basement, and dedicated two years of her life to comforting strangers and helping rebuild their lives. The network of community leaders, government agencies, spiritual leaders we developed over the years became important to the redevelopment of Southern Monmouth County.”

Mulligan’s community work after Superstorm Sandy was recognized by President Obama as well as Governor Christie. In 2013, Mulligan was one of 20 nonprofit leaders selected to complete the Strategic Perspectives in Nonprofit Management program at Harvard University’s Business School.

“None of the impact Coastal Habitat has made could have been done without the volunteers and donors we rely on so heavily,” said Mulligan. “I see our role as that of facilitator for people who want to reach out and help others. ‘Help’ could mean donating, sponsoring, shopping at our thrift store, or volunteering – it’s all critical to creating lasting local impact.”

Mulligan is humbled and grateful to everyone who has supported her and the organization over the past 15 years.

“I see my time with Coastal Habitat as a gift,” said Mulligan. “I’m thankful for the opportunity to help the Southern Monmouth community. While I am moving into the next step of my journey, I don’t plan on changing my commitment to reaching out and helping others.”

Join Mulligan at the 2017 Hearts & Hammers Celebration and ReStore Grand Opening, honoring Coastal Habitat’s community partners: The Coaster newspaper, Pat Fasano, and Theo Stewart on Thursday, Oct. 19, 6 to 8 pm. Visit CoastalHabitat.org to purchase reception tickets (\$50) and for sponsorship information.