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New Director Takes Helm at Gratiot County Community Foundation

By Emma Selmon
 Herald Staff Writer

Gratiot County's foremost charitable foundation has found their new leader in one of their former student volunteers.

Alma native Chelsea Holmes Matz is the new executive director of the Gratiot County Community Foundation (GCCF). She is taking the reins from Tina Travis, who recently retired after 18 years of leading the organization.



**HOLMES
 MATZ**

Following a seven-week search that attracted many qualified applicants, the GCCF Board of Directors voted unanimously to offer Holmes Matz the position. Board President Tim Lambrecht said that while the hiring committee interviewed a number of other "really strong" contenders, Holmes Matz "clearly emerged as the top candidate."

With years of relevant professional experience with foundations, nonprofits, finances and community outreach, Holmes Matz has the skills needed to head the organization. These skills, coupled with her knowledge of the Gratiot County community and her history with GCCF as an alumna of the organization's Youth Advisory Council (YAC) makes her "pretty much the ideal candidate" for the job.

See **DIRECTOR** page 5



Cindy Taylor-Miller (left) and Anna Beals inside Dream Works Resale Shoppe. The secondhand store provides vocational and recreational opportunities for adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities. (Herald photo - Meiners)

Dream Works Resale Shoppe Thrives On Two-Way Kindness

By William Meiners
 Herald Staff Writer

The dream, from the beginning, has been to provide adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities the opportunity to enjoy themselves and live out their greatest lives. The Dream Works Resale Shoppe in downtown Ithaca is helping create that space. And as the calendar turns toward May, they'll soon have summer seasonal items on sale.

The secondhand store is owned and operated by Day Dreams Inc, which was established in 2012 and became a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization in 2014. They put on events and held weekly club

meetings. For Cindy Taylor-Miller, president of Day Dreams, the events allowed these adults, who can sometimes fall out of public systems, to enjoy themselves, along with families, friends, and caregivers.

"Our primary mission is to address all facets of the adult life of people with disabilities," Taylor-Miller said. "Once they finish or complete special education between 18 and 26 years of age, there's nothing."

That's a national situation, Taylor-Miller said, not just a local one. And she has seen it firsthand in her own life.

See **KINDNESS** page 2

EMT Pulls Man to Safety Following Fiery Crash

By William Meiners
 Herald Staff Writer

In the high-adrenaline world of Mobile Medical Response (MMR), it's good to have a quiet night once in a while. That had been the case last Tuesday evening, April 13.

With the sun sinking low in the springtime sky, Keith Hunt, an Emergency Medical Technician, and his partner Chloe Allen, a paramedic, were performing an "interfacility transfer" of a patient through Breckenridge. No hurry, no rush. Hunt even pulled over at one point to try and photograph a bald eagle on the side of the road.

The bald eagle didn't stick around long enough to have its picture taken, so Hunt resumed their eastbound travel on Lincoln Road. In the distance he noticed smoke up ahead, at first figuring that someone might be burning leaves.

See **CRASH** page 2



Chloe Allen, an MMR paramedic, took this picture moments after her partner, Keith Hunt, an EMT, pulled a man from the fiery wreckage.

Ithaca Habitat for Humanity Home to be Dedicated on Saturday

By William Meiners
 Herald Staff Writer

A family of four, plus their two Alaskan Huskies, will celebrate the dream of homeownership on Saturday, April 24. The Habitat for Humanity build, which weathered construction delays, a Michigan winter, and COVID-19, will be dedicated at 401 Barber Street in Ithaca at 9:30 a.m.

Curtis Davidson and Samantha Gibson, with their two girls, Jazmin, 12 years old, and Elektra, 8 years old, will soon leave behind five years of apartment living in nearby St. Louis for the new single-family home. The energy-efficient residence, complete with

a hybrid water heater and high efficiency washer and dryer, is representative of the Habitat homes in recent years. In fact, Consumer's Energy provided a grant to help ensure this "smarter" home is more sustainable. In addition to maintaining reasonable utility bills with an energy-savings focus, the home is built with a family's long-range stay in mind.

High rafters in the attached garage provide extra storage space in a house without a basement. Wider doorways throughout the interior could accommodate wheelchairs should they be needed down the road.

See **HABITAT** page 5



Samantha Gibson holds one happy dog alongside Jazmin, Elektra, and Curtis Davidson in front of their new house at 401 Barber Street in Ithaca. The Habitat for Humanity home will be dedicated on Saturday, April 24 at 9:30 a.m. The community is invited to take part in the celebration. (Herald photo - Meiners)



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HABITAT continued from page 1

Whenever a home is completed and a mortgage is about to be signed, a dedication ceremony takes place. There are several reasons for the celebration, said L. Quinn Lincoln-Keon, executive director of Clinton-Gratiot Habitat for Humanity. The first is to help honor all the volunteers and donors who helped see the home from its concrete base to its shingled top. It's also a chance to welcome the new owners — with the community on hand to wish them well.

All are welcome to the dedication ceremony. "Habitat is a non-profit that belongs to all of us," said Lincoln-Keon, who will present house keys and a Bible to the family. "We invite everyone to see what simple, decent and affordable housing means."

Of course it goes beyond decent and affordable homes. There are many heartwarming stories about Habitat for Humanity. Lincoln-Keon, now in her 21st year with the organization, has seen firsthand the joyful tears of families finally finding stability in a new home after moving from place to place for years. There are also the community connections that accompany its construction. Friendships are forged over work on a worthy cause. Yet from a very practical perspective, a Habitat build shows how easing homeownership simply benefits the whole neighborhood.

There are three criteria to be considered for a Habitat house, Lincoln-Keon said. First, there must be a demonstrated need for housing, which could be because the current residence is too crowded, in an unsafe neighborhood, overpriced in rent or utilities, structurally unsound, and more. The family must be low to moderate income, based on household size. And they must be willing partners when it comes to both sweat equity and financial counseling. Once those qualifiers are met, the families are walked through the process.

"We don't give homes away," said Lincoln-Keon. "These people sign an affordable mortgage and pay taxes and insurance. They help pay for the police and the library."

Any family facing the possibility of homelessness, or even a life with seemingly endless moves, might be in the midst of a multi-generational crisis. So much, it seems, stems from the basic need of shelter. "If we can meet the greatest need, which is housing, it's a lot easier to meet some of those other needs," said Lincoln-Keon, who has long had a "desire to help people make their lives better."

And there's the practical notion. Habitat for Humanity helps people help themselves. Imagine some of the bleakest scenarios, where a family might be wondering about a next meal or where they might sleep at night. The home, which they help build themselves, becomes that centerpiece of stability, a place to start over.

Families work with Habitat to clean up credit scores and even plan for emergency funding, effectively receiving financial counseling to better serve them in the long run. The couple worked in the Habitat ReStore for a while. "They have been an amazing family to work with," Lincoln-Keon said. "They have worked so hard on this house, following every guideline to partner with us."

"Another really neat thing about the Habitat program is that each house helps build future houses," said Lincoln-Keon, who helps impress upon new homeowners that previous partner homeowners

have made timely mortgage payments. "Of course costs continue to go up for building materials, especially now at two to four times the cost of two years ago."

It's more than heart and soul that goes into a home. These new homeowners put their backs into it, too. "There's something truly amazing about the sweat equity portion of Habitat where partner homeowners put in 250 hours of their own time, per adult, into the construction of that house," Lincoln-Keon said.

Not only will they appreciate that roof in a rainstorm or the insulated walls on a winter's coldest night, but they've likely picked up some skills through the building process. Lincoln-Keon looks at the sweat equity as more than a requirement. "It's a life skills builder," she said.

For Davidson, who works at Craig Frames in Ithaca's Industrial Park, the literal framing of the house may have been the most exciting part of the build. Those rising walls first made it seem like a home. Both girls enjoyed digging into the soil on the initial groundbreaking. Gibson, who happened to be busy with some touchup painting on the new walls the week before the dedication ceremony, said she enjoyed that activity the most. Putting those final touches on the blue walls that will become a home signaled the end of a long journey, which first broke ground in July 2019.

The Saturday dedication is the first in Gratiot County in about seven years, after a transition period when Clinton and Gratiot counties merged into a single Habitat entity. Though sometimes rural communities are shortchanged on subjects regarding potential housing shortages, the problem nevertheless persists.

Lincoln-Keon hopes the latest build is something that gets them back on track. They did some major home repairs and put in some wheelchair ramps, but the home on Barber Street was the lone new build in a pandemic year. The volunteer crews worked within COVID-19 protocols, having their temperatures taken and making declarations that they were symptom free. Yet the work progressed in unforeseen attire. "It's very different working in facemasks and trying to maintain social distance

while you're raising a wall," Lincoln-Keon said.

The pandemic, however, never pushed the work completely aside. Lincoln-Keon said they lost volunteers who had reasons to be particularly cautious — perhaps because of age or a weakened immune system. It was admittedly tough to deal with not just because of a loss of labor, but also for the lost expertise that those people often brought to the site.

So new volunteers needed to step up. Many of them came from the Ithaca Church of God, which is right down the road from the build site. "They were sending people every single day," Lincoln-Keon said. "Every time we had a volunteer opportunity they had people coming from the church. It was really kind of an answer to a prayer. As one door closed, another opened to us. We made some new friends, too."

That doorway to opportunity has another benefit beyond the good karma that comes from selflessness. Lincoln-Keon likens it as a way to "enhance your circles of influence." Swinging a hammer next to someone is bound to lead to conversation. She told the story of two guys once working alongside each other on a roof. A younger guy kept looking at an older guy, then finally confessed over a break that he looked really familiar but couldn't place him.

The older gentleman said he was a judge that sentenced the younger man to the community service hours that brought him to the site. The connection, on a build instead of inside a courtroom, may have led to some refreshing perspectives. Other times, it could lead to a new job opportunity. Or just a beer after the build.

It was the first time volunteering for some people working on the Barber Street home. Habitat welcomes anyone willing to put on some boots and a pair of gloves. Lincoln-Keon said they love to have skilled laborers, but if you're willing to hold up a wall and maybe learn a skill, you can get some on-the-job training. "If you don't know how to do anything, we'll teach you," she said.

Anyone interested in volunteering for Habitat for Humanity can find information on their website (cghabitat.org) or Facebook page (facebook.com/HabitatClinton).

DIRECTOR continued from page 1

"She has not only the background and the skills, but she's got a ton of enthusiasm and she's got excellent ideas," Lambrecht said. "With her knowledge of foundations and with her knowledge of the community, she can really hit the ground running."

For Holmes Matz, she's looking forward to returning to her "Gratiot County roots" to make a difference in the community that's shaped the person she is today.

"I'm just very proud to return and be a part of the fabric of this great community," she said. "I'm excited for all that's to come."

It's been a few years since Holmes Matz has lived in mid-Michigan, but the experiences she had growing up around community service in Gratiot County were formative. The daughter of the long-time volunteer advisor for YAC, Holmes Matz was raised with the "idea of giving back and wanting to make a difference in [her] community."

She herself was a member of YAC throughout her high school years, serving as president of the organization. Her dedication to service shaped her postsecondary educational path: the Alma High School Class of 2008 graduate went on to earn a bachelor's degree in policy studies with a minor in communication at Syracuse University, and then a master's degree in information and communication sciences from Ball State University.

Holmes Matz has served in a variety of roles to strengthen the skills needed for the leader of a nonprofit. She's worked in corporate finances, has been on staff for foundations and nonprofits, and has continued to volunteer her time to nonprofits and professional leadership organizations as well.

Most recently, she's been serving as the program coordinator for the Council of Michigan Foundations as well as the assistant director of youth initiatives for the Michigan Community Service Commission.

When the executive director position at GCCF became available, it seemed like the "perfect next step" for her in her career.

"I really feel like this position combines all the different experiences I've had at this point in my career," she said. "I'm really excit-

ed to look at leading the foundation into the next decade here."

Holmes Matz was one of over 20 qualified applicants for the position, and one of five who were called back for an interview, said Board President Lambrecht. He said the search process was a "gratifying" one: though the departing executive director leaves "big shoes to fill," he knows that Holmes Matz will bring her skills, knowledge and network connections to the role and help bring "really take the foundation to another level."

The board is also excited that the executive director position is being filled by a former YAC member.

"[Holmes Matz has] kind of come full-circle in that she was a beneficiary of the good work that the community foundation does, and now she's coming back to serve that same community foundation," said Lambrecht.

Holmes Matz feels the same way. For her to return to the community that inspired her to embark on a service-driven career is "kind of [like] coming home."

"The lessons I've learned from growing up in Gratiot County... allowed me to make a difference and be a part of solving community challenges in the different paths I've had, so it really feels like a sense of coming back to my roots," she said.

Holmes Matz assumed her new role at the end of last month. She and the GCCF Board of Directors are grateful for former Executive Director Tina Travis, who "went above and beyond" to help Holmes Matz settle into the position. She said that Travis has "been such a pillar" for the foundation, and she's eager to build upon the work her predecessor has done over the past 18 years.

It's with a "sense of gratitude and excitement" that Holmes Matz looks forward to her future at GCCF. She's ready to "reorient [herself] within the community," reconnecting with the volunteers, donors and partners that make the foundation's work possible.

"There's just so many really incredible people within Gratiot County, so I'm looking forward to just expanding and building upon those relationships and furthering the work of the foundation," she said.



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