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Habitat celebrates 20 years

VENICE BUHAIN; The Olympian

OLYMPIA – Cindy Schultz of Olympia said she and a homeowner being housed by Habitat for Humanity in Hungary didn't share a language – but they did share a dictionary.

The two used the dictionary to communicate, as Schultz, her husband, Jerry, and others volunteered in Hungary to build a home for the woman and her family.

"Language is such an immaterial thing," Cindy Schultz remarked as she and her husband reminisced about their work for Habitat for Humanity.

The Schultzes founded the Olympia affiliate of the international organization 20 years ago. The South Puget Sound affiliate marked the anniversary Sunday with a celebration at the Schmidt House.

The nondenominational international organization recruits volunteers to build affordable housing for families who fall under certain income guidelines. The homes are sold to the identified families with a no-interest loan.

Since 1989, South Puget Sound Habitat for Humanity has built 38 homes in the area. About 24 of the South Sound homes built since the local affiliate started are occupied by the original families.

The organization's 20th year also brings several milestones, including the opening of the new location of its downtown Olympia store, ReStore, at 415 Olympia Ave. N.E.

The store, which raises money to build the group's local houses, sells salvaged building materials at its new, larger location. The group estimates that in 2008, ReStore diverted more than 170 tons of items from the landfill.

"That number is going to get bigger, now that we're bigger," said Susan Newman, development coordinator for South Puget Sound Habitat for Humanity.

The next year for the group is expected to be busy. The group plans to finish the final four homes planned for its Fairview development in Olympia and start a planned new development in Tumwater that will be called Shepherd's Grove.

"We're still looking for families for Fairview," Newman said.

At the 20th anniversary celebration Sunday, attendees heard about the Schultzes' experiences with Global Village, the international organization's program that brings volunteers to different countries for projects there.

The Schultzes, who also raised money and awareness for the organization in 1996 with a cross-country walk that was documented in a book "Sole Mates," said people in South Sound have been supportive ever since the first project in the Black Lake area.

Jerry Schultz said that the late Millard Fuller, who founded Habitat for Humanity International, gave him good advice about starting to build affordable housing in the Olympia area.

"If you have \$1,000, dig a hole and start praying," Schultz remembered.