

## Summer Associates A Special Report

# If I Had a Hammer

Buildable Hours works with Habitat for Humanity to give families a new home.

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Summer program activities at major law firms have developed a certain predictability—baseball games, sailing trips, some nice dinners, and the like. Buildable Hours was designed as an alternative summer activity that would not only enhance the summer associate experience but also leave a lasting contribution to the community.

Buildable Hours assembles groups of law firms to donate time, money, and a little sweat to construct homes in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity. Our first summer was a success: Last year, nine participating firms in the Washington area raised about \$50,000 for Habitat and provided a local family the opportunity to leave a substandard, dangerous living situation.

The home we built last year is on 56th Place, N.E., and will be occupied by a single mother with four children. They previously lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Southeast Washington in a building that was unhealthy and unsafe. Our homeowner this year is a nurse who was living with her three sons in a public housing complex where drug activity and violence were commonplace.

Our formula was simple. We suggested to major firms that instead of yet another fancy catered dinner or ball game, they consider “treating” their summer associates and lawyers to an opportunity to construct something far more concrete (or, more accurately, wooden) than a good argument or a well-drafted debenture. Participating firms donate \$5,000 (or more) to Habitat for Humanity and a team of 15 to 20 people to work for a day on a Habitat job site, alongside AmeriCorps volunteers.

The idea has taken hold. This year, Buildable Hours has signed up more than 50 law firms to fund and build homes in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles. We will raise more than \$250,000 and put to work the construction skills (or at least the efforts) of some 1,200 lawyers, staff, and summer associates from major law firms in three cities.

How do we explain our ability to grow like a 1990s Nasdaq

stock during a prolonged downturn in law firm economics? We believe three factors are the cornerstone of our success.

- **The Ideals Embodied by Habitat.** While there are many remarkable things about Habitat for Humanity, two characteristics make the program particularly appealing to lawyers, regardless of their political orientation. First, Habitat recognizes that having a decent place to live plays a fundamental role in the quality of life. There is no substitute for decent housing to support parents in creating a nurturing family environment, providing a place of joy and safety for their children, and fostering a sense of community among neighbors.

Second, one tenet of the Habitat philosophy is investment in people. The money contributed to Habitat buys the land and the basic materials to construct the homes, but Habitat homeowners are required to contribute 500 hours of sweat equity to build their homes, as well as others'. In addition, the homeowner assumes a no-interest, 30-year mortgage, the proceeds of which fund additional homes. Significantly, the default rate by Habitat homeowners has been less than 1 percent.

- **The Needs of Law Firms and Summer Programs.** The nature of law firms and what they sell has made it particularly difficult in recent years for firms to find ways to get effectively involved in community activities. While robust pro bono programs provide one avenue for community participation, finding ways to connect firms with their communities has been a challenge, particularly in major cities.

A second long-standing challenge for firms has been finding summer associate activities that allow law students to get a real understanding of the firm's people and personalities. The venerable traditional summer outings—sailing trips, ballgames, catered dinners—all represent well-meaning (and expensive) opportunities for informal interaction. But none of these social outings has quite the intense team-building effect of a day on a Habitat job site. When you put a group of lawyers in matching Buildable Hours T-shirts, give them hard hats and tool belts, and put them to work in the summer sun, the act of building real walls knocks down the invisible ones between partners, associates, and summer associates. And the \$5,000 cost can certainly fit the summer budget of any major firm.

• **An Inspired and Dedicated Core.** Of course, no program involving 55 law firms organizes itself. In each city, a small group of partners and associates spread the word about the Buildable Hours concept and cajoled their friends and colleagues at other firms to lobby recruiting coordinators and managing partners to commit to the program.

The 2003 Buildable Hours team is anchored by Latham & Watkins attorneys in three cities: Jessica Gibson and Kristen Murray in Washington; Manny Abascal, George Avila, and Jim Dillavou in Los Angeles; and Liz Flanagan, Shai Ingber, and Elena Shifflette in New York. Meanwhile, Sharon Light at Caplin & Drysdale performed, pro bono, the legal and compliance work for Buildable Hours, which is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) entity.

It's a substantial logistics and communications burden to ensure that 55 law firms get the build dates they want and answers to all their questions. Buildable Hours has no staff; all of the money contributed by law firms goes to Habitat. Our only expenses have been things like the hats, T-shirts, and stylish temporary tattoos we provide to the builders—a cost that LexisNexis has agreed to underwrite this year.

Buildable Hours inspires contributions from individuals, as well as their law firms. Donations from individual attorneys and staff members at several firms have helped to meet, or even exceed, the required contribution. In Washington, the cost to build a house is \$85,000.

While the first two years have been challenging, we have been pleasantly surprised at how readily so many firms have signed up. At some level, this program sells itself. We have

already received expressions of interest from firms in other cities about participating next year, and we hope to double in size again next year. Some firms plan to send their new fall associates out to the build site as part of the welcome to full-time work at the firm.

At the end of the day, what makes this program satisfying for all of the participants is the sense of making a difference in the lives of real people. "You're on the site working, you have little kids from the family that will live in the house, they're all excited and running around and pointing out where their rooms are going to be. You can imagine the family sitting down to dinner in the kitchen you helped build," said one member of Latham's D.C. build team last summer.

Sometime in late 2003 (or early 2004), the three houses built by Buildable Hours this year will be dedicated. All the law firm participants will be invited to watch the new homeowner cut the ribbon and receive a new set of keys. There will be speeches and picture taking, and lots of emotion. The families will be enriched by the chance to start a life in a new home, but the participating lawyers will also be richer—and the summer associates will have an experience they will never forget.

More information about the program is available at the new Buildable Hours Web site, [www.buildablehours.com](http://www.buildablehours.com).

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