

Habitat for Humanity to Build First Home in Vernonia

**Cheri Storm and her family
will be the partners in the project**

By Scott Laird

Columbia County Habitat for Humanity has announced they have selected a very deserving family to be their partner in the first home they will build in the Vernonia community.

Cheri Storm, her adult son Tyler, who is legally blind, and her teenage daughter December, a student at the Vernonia Family Academy, will be working with Habitat and local volunteers to construct the home, hopefully starting this summer. Storm says the timeline for construction depends on donations, because all Habitat homes are built with donated construction materials.

"The plans for the house have gone to engineering, and once the plans are approved we can start getting permits," said Storm. "After that we'll get the foundation poured and then volunteers can start working on the construction. We would love to have Christmas in our new home."

The home, which will be located on 6th Street, was designed specifically for Storm and her family, with a daylight basement that takes advantage of the slope of the lot. The upstairs will be completely ADA accessible to accommodate Tyler's needs, with two bedrooms in the lower level.

Habitat For Humanity is a non-profit that builds affordable homes and provides home ownership opportunities for families in need by partnering with community skills and resources that include retired builders, weekend enthusiasts, individual donors, city governments, and more. Potential applicants are screened based on their ability to pay an affordable mortgage and willingness to partner and complete all the required financial and home buyer education, and participate in the construction of the home. "There are many families in need of decent affordable housing in Vernonia which has made this selection especially difficult," said Habitat for Humanity in their newsletter announcing their first Vernonia home. "We are very pleased to be able to offer this opportunity to Cheri and her family."

Storm and her family's journey to become a Habitat partner was long and arduous. In 2011, Storm moved her family to Vernonia to raise her three youngest children away from the gangs, drugs, and violence they were experiencing in Bremerton, Washington. She purchased a home that was in foreclosure using all her cash savings. Storm says she did her due diligence before purchasing the home, and had a home inspection done. "No one disclosed to me that the home had been flooded in 2007 or that it needed to be raised – there were no disclosures about the home," she said. On the day before she was scheduled to

move in, she was told the home was not eligible to connect to City utilities or electricity until it was raised. "It had already been closed on and I had purchased it." With no finances left Storm was stuck. "At that point, what do you do?"

What Storm did was not give up and persevere. She and her children, who were 14, 12, and December was 4, along with Storm's disabled mother moved into and lived in the house for the next eight years, without water, sewer, or electricity; Tyler lived with them for a while but it was too difficult and unsafe so he moved in with other family

at the Bridge Street Mini Mart. "I wanted people to see me everyday and know I wasn't going to go away." She also reached out to State Senator Betsy Johnson's office and asked for help. Because of Storm's situation Johnson introduced legislation, SB 465, passed in 2013, which requires local governments with substantially damaged structures caused by flooding to be recorded in the office of the county clerk.

In 2019 her mother had a heart attack and they realized they could no longer stay in the home. She let the house go back into foreclosure and rented two bedrooms from a friend, where they lived for over two years. Last year they were able to move into a rental in town.

Storm joined the staff at Vernonia Dental in 2018 where she works as an Expanded Function Dental Assistant, and also works at Black Iron Grill, "to help make ends meet."

Last year Storm's friend Amy Cielo suggested she apply for the Habitat for Humanity opportunity in Vernonia. "It is a long process, and there is a lot of paper work to submit," said Storm. Now that she's been accepted, Storm will be required to take home owner classes. She will have to get a mortgage and make payments, and will own the home when it is complete. She and her family will be required to put in 200 hours of "sweat equity" labor into the construction of the home; the project will also require 200 hours of community volunteer labor.

That volunteer labor and fundraisers will be organized by Storm's friend Jenn Rau, who is the Habitat for Humanity advocate, a volunteer position who acts as a go-between for Storm and Habitat, helping troubleshoot any issues and making sure the entire process goes as smoothly as possible. Rau says any funds raised locally for the project will stay in Vernonia and go directly to the Storm family home project.

"Everything we've been through has made us stronger people," said Storm. "I'm so excited that this opportunity is going to finally get my family a home. I always just wanted to provide for my kids, that's why we ended up in Vernonia."



Tyler, Cheri, and December at the lot in Vernonia where their new home will be built.

in Washington. They showered at the local Anderson Park campground where they also purchased bulk water. The house had natural gas, so they had a stove they could light and cook with. They had a generator for a while, but that had to be shut off at 10:00 pm. Storm continued to fight for her family and their right to live in their home. She tried to work with both the City of Vernonia and Columbia County to try and resolve her issues, but received little help and got no traction. "Every time I did what I was told to do, I was told, 'No, not good enough.' It was very frustrating and very disheartening. I thought I was doing the right thing by buying a home that my family would always live in. It was like getting kicked in the stomach," said Storm. With a background as a dental assistant, instead Storm took a job

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