

## Teen raises funds for Habitat house using bar mitzvah cash

Alexander Hill asked for donations, instead of presents



Alexander Hill, 14, an 8th grade student at the Waldorf School, has raised \$40,000, partly through his Bar Mitzvah project, to build a Habitat for Humanity house in Pigtown. Hill, who is holding a wooden sword he made, will speak at the dedication for the house on Feb. 13. When he turns 16, he hopes to help build houses for Habitat for Humanity. (Amy Davis, Baltimore Sun / January 26, 2011)

By Mary Gail Hare, The Baltimore Sun  
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Many teens associate a 16th birthday with wheels and the first chance to drive, but for Alexander E. Hill, that milestone means tools and the chance to build a home for a needy family.

When Alexander turns 16 in two years, he will be eligible to build a house with Habitat for Humanity, an international nonprofit organization that makes homeownership possible for low-income families.

In the meantime, the 14-year-old Owings Mills teen who plays baseball and the harp and excels in academia, woodworking and karate can add fundraising to his accomplishments. He asked guests at his bar mitzvah to forgo the presents and support his favorite cause. They replied with a generosity that led to his \$40,000 contribution to a Habitat home in Baltimore's **Pigtown** neighborhood.

"Habitat gives me an access to helping someone and lets me handle something outside of myself," he said. "Giving someone a home is like giving them a life."

Alexander, a student at the Waldorf School in North Baltimore, is one of three sponsors whose contributions helped build a house — he calls it "my house" — on Ward Street.

"I have passed by the house, and it looks great," he said. "I watched it go from a shell with steps to almost nothing to a home. I hope to meet the new owners soon."

He may have already. Both he and Edward Fisher, who moves into the home next month, volunteer at Paul's Place, a community center that overlooks the neighborhood.

Jayna Powell, the faith relations coordinator at Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake, said the teen's contribution — nearly half the \$100,000 needed to raise a home — was invaluable and admirable.

"On so many levels, what Alexander did shines," she said. "It shows that you don't have to be onsite to significantly impact our homeowners."

Alexander's efforts began two years ago, when, at 12, he was preparing for his bar mitzvah. He conceded that the lure of the traditional gifts was tempting, but ultimately, he said, "I get everything I want or need."

"Alexander was so disappointed when he found out he was too young to build," said his mother, Liora Hill. "Fundraising was his way to help, and he hopes he has inspired others."

In the invitation to his September 2009 ceremony, mailed to about 200, he included a note requesting donations to Habitat's Chesapeake chapter, which builds in the city as well as in Baltimore and Anne Arundel counties.

"What moves me the most is people living on the streets who believe they will never have what you and I take for granted," he wrote. "Through Habitat, they buy homes, they live with dignity."

He also called family, friends, his father's co-workers and a few strangers, asking for funds.

"Each time, it was a new message, but he spoke from the heart," Liora Hill said.

Alexander said, "I had to explain to a few people what Habitat was all about, but a lot of people already knew. I told them that this is a way of giving people back their lives."

He is conversant with all the requirements that applicants for a Habitat home must meet, including the 300 hours of "sweat equity" or labor each prospective homeowner must complete on another applicant's home. That is in addition a solid employment history, good credit, meeting mortgage standards and completing courses in financial management and home maintenance.

"It's all pretty cool," he said. "They get a 30-year mortgage with no interest, and the money from one mortgage goes to help build another Habitat house."

The Chesapeake chapter, which will complete its 300th home this spring, is working on 42 homes this year and has renovated 11 houses in Pigtown, the last of which is "Alexander's house." It will soon be home to Fisher, a technician at Mercy Medical Center.

Fisher cannot wait to move from an apartment into a home of his own. In a statement released by Habitat, he said, "I plan to be a positive force in the new neighborhood. I know what it is like not to have anything. I want to show other people that they can do it, just like I have."

Members of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, including the Hill family, have long volunteered with Habitat. Alexander's father, Greg, joined a group from the congregation that traveled to New Orleans and helped with the post-**Hurricane Katrina** rebuilding, an effort that inspired his son.

Alexander will speak at the house dedication Feb. 13. While he is not sure what he will say, he is resolute in his desire to help. Members of the Interfaith Coalition will donate a Bible and a Quran to Fisher. Alexander, representing his Jewish community, will give a traditional *zedakah* or charity box.

He is considering several options for high school in the fall and looking down the road to college, where he would like to concentrate on the sciences.

"I hope he chooses a college with a Habitat chapter," said Powell, the Habitat staffer. "If he doesn't, he will probably start one."

As he prepares, Alexander is honing his building skills.

"When I turn 16, I will take my tools and take a spot on the build," Alexander said. "For now, I am glad that I have raised enough money to build a house for someone in need."

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