

# Stephanie Austin, Spring 2008 Homeowner

Rachel Schoumacher

During this spring's build, regardless of the weather, Stephanie Austin sat under the registration tent to greet volunteers. She became an expert on the check-in process — waiver signed, first and last name written on a name tag, a purple band encircling every wrist.

As she filed each waiver form, she was sure to thank the volunteer for coming out to help build her house. It didn't matter how many people were waiting in line — Stephanie thanked every person for giving his or her time.

"You just have to be a teacher who wants to help the kids actually understand what you're talking about," she said.

On the build site, it was Stephanie who was eager to learn. She asked questions of the staff and volunteers, and talked excitedly about being able to entertain visitors in her new home.

She inherited her hospitable nature from her mother, Gail, who accompanied her to the build site every day and could often be found toting heavy buckets filled with drinks and ice.

"[My mother] is my best friend. She has truly been an inspiration to me since I was a little bitty girl," Stephanie said.

It was Gail who introduced her daughter to Habitat. She was allowed to do the physical sweat equity hours for Stephanie. When she wasn't replenishing drinks, she was caulking, painting and learning the fundamentals of building. Although these were things she'd never done before, she worked tirelessly, stopping only to share pictures and house updates with Stephanie.

While Stephanie wasn't able to build her home, she is a willing volunteer, working diligently to complete her sweat equity hours.

"I volunteered for the MS society, Oak Grove Baptist Church Health Center, Hope and Healing Center, and for Habitat, helping with paperwork and that type of thing," Austin said.

She was also the star of Habitat's donor cultivation video, where she hammered the final nail into the window frame of her home. Weeks later, she still

looked at that nail in awe, so proud that she was able to contribute to the construction of her beautiful home.

Stephanie's pastor, James E. Kendrick of Oak Grove Baptist Church, gave the opening prayer during the home dedication ceremony on May 10th.

"My mom, my family, my church family, my pastor, they've all really been in my corner," she said. "I just enjoy life. I look at my MS — you know, it could have been worse. I'm blessed to be able to get around as I do. I just take every day with a smile."



*Above: Marilyn Hughes of Hilton gives Stephanie a hug after presenting her with the keys to her new home. Stephanie Moreno of IP and Tracy Lawson, also of Hilton, look on; Above right: Gail Austin caulks the foundation of her daughter's home on day one of the build. Right: Stephanie hammers the final nail into her new home on the last day of the build.*



If the volunteer asked, and sometimes if they didn't, she would point to her future home, one house down from the volunteer tent, which would be painted a cheery yellow.

Stephanie graduated from Lemoyne Owen College in 1994 and began teaching fifth and sixth grade science. She was forced into retirement in her early thirties after being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

Stephanie loved her students, so it devastated her that she would no longer be able to work with them on a daily basis. She still enjoys telling stories about "all of her children."