

New Beginnings



*A story of
Hope and Inspiration
in a chapter of life.*

Jeff Barley

“New Beginnings”



By Jeff Barley

This book is dedicated to all of those people that I met on this wonderful journey who, named in its pages, supported, inspired and gave me the strength to fulfil my 'dream' and the dreams of others by offering a fresh, new start in life, a new beginning!

Above all however; if it were not for my darling wife Jane who unselfishly brought the content of one 'fateful telephone call' to my ears coupled with her unyielding support and encouragement, then this story may have never been told.

"Thank you Jane: - my Rock, most Wonderful wife and True Friend."

Contents

1.	Map of the State of Georgia.	4
2.	Preface.	5
3.	A poem: - What will I be?	7
4.	The Dream.	12
5.	The Telephone call	16
6.	The Planning.	19
7.	Laura:-A change of Heart!	23
8.	The Airport.	28
9.	Americus.	32
10.	The Yard.	36
11.	Smithville.	40
12.	Old Ronald.	44
13.	Every day life.	52
14.	The Doctors surgery.	60
15.	“Hey Habitat.”	63
16.	Farewell.	66
17.	Moving on.	70
18.	The Church Burnings.	71
19.	The House is ready.	77
20.	The Olympic Games.	84
21.	Life Goes On	90
22.	Habitat: - 20 th Anniversary.	98
23.	Jane’s return.	105
24.	The United Holiness Church.	108
25.	Americus: - The closing months.	115
26.	“We’ll keep a welcome.”	123
27.	The closure of a page.	129
28.	Post script.	131
29.	A poem: - A New Beginning.	133
30.	Acknowledgements.	135

A map of the State of Georgia showing Americus, South of Atlanta



Preface

This is *My* story, a detailed account of ‘New Beginnings.’ It is a narrative that will take you through a series of life changing experiences set against a backdrop of despair, torment and to many, a life without hope. For years, I have, spoken to friends and acquaintances of various aspects of this period in my life, but until now, I have never divulged all, saving the full account until I considered it appropriate to put it into print. That time has come and is now yours to read.

In setting the scene, I have chosen to take a brief look into my past in order to fully appreciate and add perspective to what became of me at a time when all seemed lost and forsaken.

This book however, whilst focussing much upon a chapter of my existence, also reaches out to other individuals that I met along the way. ‘**Born from a dream,**’ my direction was to change completely, affecting my outlook, purpose and indeed recovery from a long and enduring illness. By offering hope to those entrenched in poverty and despair provided the panacea for change, empowering others to achieve for themselves, reach out and stand tall.

The account given in ‘New Beginnings’ commences with a poem illustrating how a life blessed with the exhilaration of success, can be shattered as without warning it evaporated into an empty, tormented mental wilderness leaving one floundering without direction or purpose. Amazingly, at a

time when all seemed lost came a dream, one which promised hope of a brighter future, a challenging opportunity and a new way of life serving others who were themselves anchored with their own insurmountable problems.

The vision was of a door opening and whilst unclear what may lay on the other side, left me with the determination and faith to guide me on to a new pathway, a journey of inspiration far away, and into the unknown.

Please note that the names of various people featured in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

A Poem
What will I be?

*Leaving school at 15 it was 1964,
another chapter opening as I walked out of the door.*

*Discarding my satchel swapping for a haversack,
entering the big wide world never to look back.*

*Which road should I travel, what line should I try,
“Go work like your father” I never questioned why?*

*And so, down to the old town, they often called the Bay,
making chains and pulleys, no, this was not the way.
I needed to express myself, to talk to interact,
to work at a machine all day was like a monkey on my back.*

*And so I took the challenge, I had to make the leap,
out of that run down factory to a city centre street.
I worked in retail fashion, men's and ladies too,
My father none too happy, “This work is not for you.”
Yet little did he understand, his eyes they could not see
I wasn't made for a factory, this was more like me!*

*Then while at work one busy day, a chance meeting at the
door,
to work at the newspaper could offer so much more.
The thought of thorough training to develop and to grow
to work for Thomson Newspapers taught me much of what I
know.*

Each morning in the classroom, the trainer there would preach,

“ If one is to achieve in life you really have to reach.”

*Throughout the 1960s in print for all to read,
from Kennedy and Johnson, the world should take great
heed.*

*If the dominoes were left to fall the rhetoric would say,
then there would be no stopping them and the Bear would
come our way!*

*And so in many thousands they were sent by Uncle Sam,
to fight a bitter conflict, in the War of Vietnam.*

*Now if you wonder where this fits, I'll tell you if I dare,
remember the unrest on our streets, and the battle of
Grosvenor Square.*

*I watched it on the TV, the violence, a thread so fine,
between protest and anarchy stood a solid thin blue line.*

*I could not watch this happen, was there something I could
do?*

*Determined, I reached for the chequered band and a
uniform of blue.*

*At first a town called Ponty, then Roath and Cathays,
and later on to Newport, so ambitious in those days.
Down town a Transporter Bridge towering high in the sky,
a rescue operation, a man about to die.*

*We climbed and fought a struggle, a slippery platform
covered in moss,
we put our lives at risk that day, he didn't give a toss.*

*Now when it seemed forgotten and almost like a dream,
a letter from the Prime-Minister, an honour from our
Queen.*

*Then later I was summoned to the office of the Chief,
three stripes upon my arm he placed, with chosen words
he'd speak.*

*"You are a man of promise" was the main thrust of his
speech,"*

"Gwent is far too small for you, you really have to reach."

*I wondered what he meant that day as I walked out of the
door,
his words so quietly spoken, I'd heard them once before.*

*And so my gaze was upwards, my sight was set quite high,
promoted to Inspector, to our friends we waived goodbye.
Up North we were to travel the feeling was so sweet,
then we heard about John Lennon, gunned down in a
New York street.*

*In Hull I did my duty, and what did I find there?
Disorder of a different kind, violence filled the air.
Throughout our major cities violence and crime,
a hair's breadth from anarchy, held back by a thin blue
line.*

*Just as it seemed to settle, no further from the truth,
battles raged throughout the North with the NUM dispute.
My job it was demanding, then I was summoned inside,
to fill a special Media role for the whole of Humberside.
To work with multi media as a spokesman for the Chief,
I recalled my former training by - Lord Thomson of Fleet.
Each day was so exciting, to incidents county wide,
the evil and the violent, experience my guide.*

*My pathway climbing upwards I remember all too well,
a three day extended interview, I felt I did quite well.
Then in the post the offer, met with a joyful sigh,
off to the Police Staff College, Staff Officer to the HMI.*

*Working in high circles, rubbing shoulders walking tall,
it was quite unique at Bramshill; you got to meet them all.
Leaders of our Government, Foreign Heads of State,
a crown upon my shoulder- teaching, this really was the
place.*

*One fateful day it happened, without warning it just came,
my mind was playing tricks on me, I didn't feel the same.
The road that I had travelled, the ladder I had climbed
seemed so much more uncertain now, threatened by my
mind.*

*I didn't want to tell them I couldn't let it slip,
but I began to struggle; I began to lose my grip.*

*At the end of my secondment I was feeling far from well,
tormented by an illness, some say a living hell.*

*Up first thing in the morning, so many tears I'd cry,
then off to do my duty, to fret, to wonder why?*

*Finally in utter torment, I couldn't take no more,
I didn't even tell them as I walked out of the door.
Parting with my uniform they all said I was mad,
my soul was ripped right out of me, as I handed in my
badge.*

*Back south to where I came from, a new job it didn't last,
I couldn't set my mind straight, I kept thinking of the past.*

*And so the only way back from this wilderness of strife,
was through treatment at a Hospital, a **Dream** and Jane my
wife.*

*The therapeutic process, one word that they would teach,
'to really climb up out of here you really have to reach.'*

*So armed with medication, a vision and a dream,
my road back came from far away, strange as it may seem.*

*Now if I were to die tomorrow and then return what would I
say?*

*I'd call upon my walk through life, what I learned along the
way.*

*Then when I make my choices and ask - **What will I be?***

I would reach out for the Blue Surge proud:-

A Policeman true, that's me!

The Dream

So that's how it was in 1990, a broken man, my career in tatters and my mental health in pieces. Yes, I tried to "pull myself around" and a new job promised much, but the strain and the anguish soon became all too much for me and I crashed.

Seemingly without direction, my mind in a haze and traumatised by the loss of my career, my wife Jane arranged for me to be seen by a psychiatrist from where I was literally scooped up and placed in the system of psychiatric care.

After the culture shock of attending a Psychiatric Hospital, as a patient, I again found myself rubbing shoulders with people from all walks of life, but this time my encounters were not like at Bramshill, here, I was amongst people who were themselves far from well, and suffering from a variety of mental conditions. It was not a pleasant experience and I soon realised the importance of what I coined as the three basic tenets of recovery.

Firstly, I had to **accept** that I was ill, not always easy when one appeared to look quite normal in the mirror whilst taking a morning shave.

Second, I needed to **adapt** to a new healing environment. My hospital was quite an austere place, with long bare corridors that echoed with every word often with patients standing, looking, staring, sometimes trying to cadge a

cigarette, but I was no use to them, I didn't smoke. On times, I found all this quite distressing and difficult to deal with but I coped, just.

Thirdly, I realised that if one could both **accept and adapt** then with the right medication, counseling and support, then I could **achieve**.

Progress was slow, but as my condition improved I was encouraged to reach for higher ground, and ultimately, a road back to work. My duties were by now reduced to filing and the simple, mundane side of office life, yet despite this I continued to struggle, to slip again and sadly was later re-admitted to the Day Hospital for a further twelve months after a series of 'breakdowns.'

Often, in desperation I would walk into a church, of whatever denomination and at any time of day to seek solace and pray. I am not a religious man, or a regular church goer, but Jane and I are both believers in God, a supreme power and to pray is something that we do regularly.

Selfishly, I would often ask for help and support for myself and family, to try to find a way forward, to just be able to pick myself up, to regain my self respect and confidence but it was hard. Whilst I never received or expected a direct answer, I just felt better for sharing my thoughts quietly knowing that somewhere out-there in the big wide open, someone, was listening.

It was during the 'rehabilitative' phase of 1993/1994 and whilst still very unsure of myself a vision came to me through a dream. The message and voice was so clear. "Prepare yourself for a journey" it said, one which would bring fresh opportunities, a new episode in life involving overseas travel, the purpose, was to help others in need and I should be prepared for considerable upheaval and personal sacrifice.

On awakening, I felt confused knowing that I had to share this vision with Jane. Telling her was going to be the easy bit, but how on earth was I to explain it with any credibility when I was still being treated for and suffering with chronic depression?

This was the first of many challenges.

At that time we were living in a very nice house in the leafy outskirts of Cardiff and I knew that if I was to follow my dream I would need to cut loose from any obstacle that might hinder it. Believing that to do so we would have to free ourselves of any financial commitments in order to facilitate the transition, our only viable option was to sell up, move into a smaller house and be mortgage free.

I tried to convince Jane of the prophetic significance of the vision as it impacted upon me and that we really should see it as a hand from God. I knew that I had to persuade her that by freeing ourselves up from a mortgage, then if all else failed to materialise we would still be able to hold our heads above water, if only just.

I had my fingers, toes and legs tightly crossed as she just looked at me motionless. Completely unflustered she pondered before saying, “You know Jeff, this could be the opportunity that we both need to help you recover, and as ever, we will never know if we don't try, let's do it.” I was overwhelmed!

We put the house on the market the very next day and within four months we had moved. On our first night in our new house Jane cried and my heart wept for her. She had given up everything to follow and support me, and all on the strength of a dream that belonged to me.

When I look back, I recall how so many of our friends would ask what on earth were we doing? I tried to explain, but they would just nod in bewilderment.

Laura our only child was almost seventeen and still in college. I don't think she could clearly understand how or why our lives had altered so much and where we, as a family were heading. One thing was for certain, I have no doubt that she was very unsettled and concerned, simply putting on a brave face just for us.

For my part, the depression would keep weaving in and out of my life, I felt unsure and anxious. Such was the impact of leaving the Police Service I couldn't even look at another officer in the street, let alone watch any news clips or TV programmes that featured officers without bursting into tears. I had to simply try to blot the police service out of what was once an integral part of me.

The Telephone Call

It was now 1995, Laura had left college and was working as a Nanny, having studied Child Care, Jane was at the bank and I was working in an office administering claims for Housing Benefit and taking on a little more responsibility.

Later that year, the three of us went to Southern Florida for a well deserved two week holiday, which included a visit to Jane's elderly aunt.

Shirley explained how we had just missed a major hurricane which had caused chaos, demolishing numerous buildings and homes in its path; we even read of the damage and destruction caused by the storm in local newspapers.

The two weeks flew by and very soon we were on our way home. Time seemed to pass with little change, my depression would peak and trough and I would do my best to cope. I hadn't lost sight of the dream and what came to me that fateful night, but so far it was just more of the same with nothing materialising until the telephone call that fateful day in August.

Jane's job involved linking with clients, some living overseas and in that capacity she had a chance telephone conversation with a long established customer.

Graham had been working abroad for a well established charity which devoted its time and energy to promoting

health, hope and dignity to Leprosy sufferers.

Graham informed Jane that he was now working for a lesser known organisation, Habitat for Humanity International, but it was unlikely that she had ever heard of it.

“That's where you are wrong Graham,” Jane remarked.
“Aren't they the people who use volunteers to build houses for the world's poorest? The one that, *“Puts love in the mortar joints.”*”

“How do you know of this?” a stunned Graham asked.
Jane explained how we had recently visited Florida and that we had read in the newspaper about Habitat and its army of volunteers building homes for people in need.’ Indeed some of the houses that withstood the storm were quoted as being “Habitat homes built with volunteer labour and because of their unskilled nature, tend to “put in the extra nail or two just to make sure.”

When Jane was telling me this I couldn't believe the coincidence. Was this the first sign from the dream?

Graham was so impressed, that he asked her if she might be interested in volunteering herself, as he required a Secretary / PA at Habitat's HQ in Americus, Georgia.

I was just overflowing with excitement, encouraging Jane to hurry up with the story.

Jane confessed that Graham was to send us application forms, one for her the other for me to work as a volunteer on a construction team. She indicated that the process may be protracted and that if we were to pass the paper sift we would be interviewed over the telephone with the possibility of a one year voluntary secondment. I couldn't believe it, this was the dream unfolding, the words were coming true; my prayers were being answered; now we just had to make it happen!

The Planning

It was early September 1995 and Jane and I having sent off our application forms were busy reading up on Habitat in readiness for what turned out to be two telephone interviews. We were also discussing with our daughter Laura the best way forward for her.

Laura made it clear that she wanted to stay at home as she had a job and a boyfriend and we agreed to this on the understanding that my brother Roger and his wife Bina, would provide supervision and support in our absence.

The interviews came and went and by late November we received the offer as applied for to take effect from April the following year subject to our obtaining visas for Voluntary Service from the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, London. How ironic! The same site of those ugly anti-war demos that prompted me to join the police all those years ago.

With the document now firmly entered into our passports, the next phase was to deal with our jobs.

Within days of returning from London we nervously presented our requests for twelve months leave of absence to our respective employers. I explained to Simon, my manager, that I was not seeking anymore than a year off without pay and that I intended to work as an unpaid volunteer for an organisation that gave a '*hand up*' as

opposed to a '*hand out*' to people in need. I explained that the potential homeowner and family would be expected to work alongside the volunteers in building their own home and that through their own individual efforts could lift themselves out of the poverty of a run-down shack into "simple, decent affordable housing." Of course a mortgage would be required but because of the involvement of volunteer labour and with the materials used being donated by large businesses and corporations it would be sold at 'cost' and interest free.

It took about three days to get a reply and when it did come I was devastated, they turned me down! The irony of it was that Jane's employers did the same, we were stunned and in shock. What were we to do?

We gave it only a couple of days during which we wrestled with the options, and on return to work, tendered our resignations. That morning I felt cold and extremely nervous but I remembered that in the dream I was told that we would have to make "great sacrifices," first our home and now our jobs.

The same afternoon, Simon called me into his office to establish the reason for my resignation, I explained that to work as a volunteer for twelve months was all I was asking for and it was something that I felt I just had to do. If an organisation such as the one I worked for could not find it within themselves to let me have unpaid leave then I would have to resign.

Just before the close of business my boss called me back into his office. “Jeff,” he said, “I have some good news for you, HR have agreed to keep your job open throughout 1996, you can take unpaid leave and go and work for Habitat.” I was ecstatic; at least I now had a job to come back to even if Jane had to relinquish hers. I was so grateful for the efforts of Simon and all concerned in making it possible.

A couple of days later, arriving home from work, Jane was waiting for me, she stood still and silent before shakily uttering, “Jeff, you will never believe this” and went on to confirm that her manager had secured a year off without pay for her on the condition that she returned to work in January 1997. Completely aghast, I just fell into an armchair, both of our employers were now prepared to support us and I wondered who or what had influenced their decisions? Either way we could now look forward to the best Christmas gift we could have ever wished for, and an opportunity that was to change our lives forever.

For the first time in a number of years this New Year’s Day had a very special meaning. No more was it a question of, what will this year bring? as we now knew that a whole new chapter was about to unfold and just hoped that we would be up to it. That aside, we convinced ourselves that with so many positive steps having already taken place and despite our obvious concerns, we just had to simply hold on and keep our nerve!

As we talked of the opportunity to work overseas for Habitat with our friends and colleagues, we became increasingly excited as we discussed what the organisation actually was all about. I had learned that it was,

“A non-governmental, non profit, ecumenical Christian Housing organisation, building simple, decent affordable housing for people in need around the world.”

Feeling reassured. I knew that my Police career which had provided me with much in the way of experience in organising, planning and working with people of all backgrounds would stand me in good stead. Also, I felt I had an innate ability to facilitate and motivate others to achieve their own ambitions and that this would prove invaluable when seeking to put direction into the lives of others.

How we had come this far was just amazing, for it was Jane who saw the window of opportunity and I kept thinking that had she not chosen to share it with me, something that she could have easily just hidden away, then we would not have been on the brink of this eventful journey.

Laura,
A change of heart

Having purchased our tickets in January, we were set to fly from Cardiff into Atlanta via Amsterdam in April. With the cost of our flights and our insurance to cover us for working overseas, plus the need to have money in our pockets, we sought to offset this by selling many of our personal possessions.

Its surprising, when one looks around one's home the number of items that fall outside the real 'needs for life' and so the process continued.

When I look back I just wonder where we got our energy from, but some how we did.

Over the weeks we liaised with Habitat's attorney regarding the entry process and admission into the United States as volunteers. As each week fell away bringing us closer to our deadline; it was now nearing the end of February, out of the blue, Laura hit us with a bombshell.

"I have changed my mind, I am not going to stay at home, I want to work as a Children's Representative with a holiday company and I know of one that is currently advertising vacancies." The problem was that the application had to be in by that Friday. We shuddered at the thought and were thrown into panic. There were only four weeks ahead of us before we were due to fly ourselves, what were we to do?

After picking ourselves up from the floor, all three of us sat around the table and discussed the issue. We wrote a list detailing the potential tasks, such as the application process for Laura, how to establish where she would be working if successful and what would the duration of the contract be as summer season with travel companies generally ends in October and we would be still in the United States. Then there was our property, what would become of our home if left empty? There were so many unanswered questions. Time was not on our side and we were worried!

Jane and I were at home when Laura telephoned the company, she handled the conversation brilliantly and it appeared to us from Laura's responses and facial expressions that they were responding favourably to her. From a further telephone call later that day I was staggered, she was to be offered a group interview on the following Tuesday where she would also be required to complete her application form. The interview however was to be held at the company's head office in Kent, we were in Cardiff, it was mid winter and snowing heavily.

With freezing conditions and a considerable distance to travel, a hire car would be needed as we had sold ours. For her part, Laura had to prepare for the interview which included making an 'activity box' based upon a children's 'Pirate' theme with several interactive games. We had just six days in which to make it happen, it was literally 'all hands on deck.'

On Monday, I collected the hire car and very early, on a cold and wintry February morning we set off, leaving Jane at home to keep an appointment with the rental agent. The pressure was immense!

Despite the appalling weather, snow, sleet and ice, we arrived safely at our destination. Having offered some final words of reassurance she went inside and that was the last I saw of Laura for another two hours or so, the wait seemed endless. I kept thinking of all that we had discussed about the interview, and how she would only have “one chance to make that first impression.”

Having slipped into ‘half sleep’ in the car to the sound of the radio, my overcoat wrapped tightly around me I was suddenly awoken by Laura’s voice. Reappearing through the front doors of the building, she ran towards me as I discarded my coat before jumping out of the car. Throwing her arms around my neck she confirmed that she had been offered a position on the Spanish island of Majorca.

Delighted, and full of emotion, the tears fell from my face; it was a huge release of tension as we braved the elements for our return.

The following morning, it was now the beginning of March, the call came, Laura had to be at Heathrow Airport in five days’ time if she wanted to be amongst the first intake for training at Palma, Majorca. She accepted with glee.

I remember clearly the scene at the airport; it all seemed to pass by so fast. Laura looked beautiful, so smartly dressed, her luggage at her side. We kissed and hugged, wished her well then through the gate she walked into the departure lounge. Suddenly we were alone, empty, just the two of us staring at each other knowing that we would not see Laura again until November.

In stunned silence, with tears streaming down Jane's face we went for a coffee before the drive back to Wales.

Back at home in Cardiff, our house seemed to echo, almost hollow without her, though we remained focused.

Following on from Jane's meeting with the rental agent, an appointment was made for later that week with a corporate client, who was looking for a property for one of her staff who was due to arrive from Japan. The agent came to our home with the managing director of a local manufacturing company, a Japanese lady, who needed a fully furnished property immediately. After a brief tour of our house, she arranged to come back the following day.

On her return she was accompanied by members of her management team and introduced us to our prospective tenant, Mr Mishi. I remember it so clearly, after looking around they all sat in a circle in the centre of our living room discussing the issue in Japanese at a hundred miles an hour! Our agent looked on in utter bewilderment. When the conversation ended, the principal stood up and in her broken English said, "We like very much, can you be out

by next week?”

I just looked at Jane then back at the lady in amazement, “why yes, of course we can.” As I glanced at Jane, she was just standing there, her face ashen, but with a wry smile I sensed a sigh of relief, we had done it!

Contracts were later drawn up and the gentleman from overseas moved in seven days later as we moved out to reside temporarily with Jane’s active, eighty-three year old father for the final days before departure.

At Jane’s dad’s home it became clear to us that he was unhappy about our impending move and expressed his total disapproval. One subdued evening, both he and his sister, challenged us both on the folly of it all suggesting that we were about to move in to some type of ‘Hippy commune’ and what might become of us. Despite our best efforts, neither could understand our motives.

As we said goodbye to Cyril, he stood forlorn in the doorway looking utterly lost. Knowing Jane’s elder brother Philip lived just a short drive away comforted us, assured in the knowledge that he would be keeping a watchful eye on his dad during our absence. What we didn’t know however was that Cyril’s health would later fail and we would never see him again.

We set off for the airport.

The Airport

Our journey to Cardiff airport seemed quite surreal, it was four in the morning and after weeks of considerable anxiety and tension everything now seemed so tranquil. Jane appeared to have lost all of her apprehensions, and was reassured to know that we were to be met at Atlanta by a member of Habitat's staff and from what we had been told there was to be another volunteer travelling out from Germany.

Helga was a lovely girl in her mid twenties who seemed so happy to meet up with us, we sat through a delay of several hours, talking over coffee of what might unfold and just getting to know each other. None of us came even close to what was about to confront us!

We boarded the plane and after what became a three and a half hour wait, flew off into the unknown, high on adrenalin and thrilled with excitement in anticipation of what was to come.

On landing at Atlanta after a nine hour flight, we disembarked and found ourselves at the end of a long bustling queue. Helga in a separate line, seemed to move a little more quickly, as we slowly inched closer to the immigration desk. I kept thinking of what the Habitat attorney had told us about the officials at Atlanta airport and how on times they can be obstructive. I even recalled being advised not to leave the airport if faced with any entry problems and to try to resolve all issues there and

then, but surely, this was not going to happen, we were in the United States to help their own people and we were simply volunteers!

Helga, was now well ahead of us, I could see that there was a black official on the desk and he was smiling and chatting with her as she passed through without any difficulties. Sadly this was not to be for us.

As we were called to the desk we were met by a white man in his forties, a rather austere looking individual with a surly attitude as he demanded our documents. Every thing he said and did was neither welcoming nor friendly. He examined our visas which were issued for twelve months under the Voluntary Service Programme and just stared at them whilst muttering under his breath.

“Who are you *working* for?” he demanded.

Recalling what the attorney had said I responded, “We are not *working* but *volunteering* for Habitat for Humanity,” as to mention work would infer that we were to be in paid employment and that would require a different visa.

“Habitat for Humanity,” he countered, “aren’t they that bunch of n.....” but stopped short of spelling it out. I knew exactly what he meant and replied nervously by saying that Habitat build houses for people in need all over the world, of all colours and faiths and that we had a visa to do just that.

“NOT HERE you don't,” as he went on to cancel our visas and admit us for just two months.

My world just sank to the floor, thinking of all of the arrangements that we had put in place back home as they flashed through my mind, I could not believe the man's ignorance. Reflecting on the attorney's advice, I told him that I wanted to appeal and was not prepared to leave until I had that opportunity. By now the airport was virtually clear of people as he abandoned us for over ten minutes. Helga, having overheard much of the conversation had by now left the foyer.

Our wait was broken when we were approached by another official who beckoned us through the gate and led us to an office where we sat behind a locked door to await the arrival of the Inspector. Eventually, and after some thirty minutes or so, I explained what had happened, how we had been treated and that our visa had been cancelled. Listening blank faced, he just asked for our documents. I even pointed through the office window to where the confrontation had taken place, but by now the customs official who had given us so much grief was nowhere to be seen.

The Inspector, for his part remained courteous, but unconcerned as to our plight, he just checked all of our papers and continued to quiz us about our plans and arrangements to later return to the UK. Questions followed as to whether we had jobs to return to and a permanent place of residence. Thankfully, I had all of the documentary

proof at hand. After a further round of scrutiny he appeared satisfied as to our genuine intentions and reluctantly overruled the two month restriction imposed earlier and re-authorised our entry in accordance with our visa but not without reminding us of the date by which we had to leave the country.

In many ways I was left feeling like a criminal, an illegal immigrant, it was awful!

Jane and I by now were exhausted and most ill-at-ease having been exposed to what was clearly our first experience of bigotry and prejudice since entering the United States of America and no, this was not the 1960's and the age of the Civil Rights movement but 1996, appalled, we gathered our luggage and moved on!

Americus

We stepped out of the terminal into the half light of early evening; it was unseasonably hot and very busy with cars rushing here and there, tyres squealing and the bright lights of Atlanta's modern high rise buildings twinkling in the distance. I caught a glimpse of Helga on the sidewalk, somewhat pensive; she was waiting patiently for us to appear standing alongside a minibus with Dan, our driver. The drive to Americus we were told was to take another two to three hours added to a journey that had started in Cardiff some eighteen hours earlier, we were worn out.

Leaving the big city behind, we discussed our encounter at the airport earlier with Dan who had made this trip many times before for other volunteers. Un-phased by our comments he simply said that whilst not a regular occurrence, we weren't the first to receive such a "*welcome*" and probably won't be the last.

Meandering on through miles upon miles of cotton fields barely visible in what by now had become complete darkness and with no obvious signs of life, we finally reached the outskirts of the small city of Americus.

Americus has a population of around 17,000 living in urban clusters spread over some 9 square miles. According to the American census of 2000 the racial makeup is 59 percent African American and 38 percent white with the remainder made up of other ethnic groups.

As we reached the city itself, my first impression was of a small dusty town in the middle of nowhere. There was hardly any traffic, the street lighting was poor with lots of run down properties and few people on the streets!

Dan sought to put it in perspective by telling us that we were now in the area of the ‘have nots,’ where poverty reigned with people eking out a meager existence with what precious little they had. He also told of other parts of town, primarily occupied by “white folk” and a smaller number of professional black people of stark comparison, something that we would later find out for ourselves.

Suggesting that we pick up some basic supplies for breakfast before going on to our respective houses we pulled in to the local supermarket, the ‘Piggly Wiggly’, one of the Deep South’s first self-service economy grocery stores founded in Memphis, Tennessee in 1916. As we drove on to the parking lot it was as though we had reached the central gathering point for the town’s black people. There were groups of youths and young men just ‘hanging out’, with their ghetto blasters living up to their name. As we stepped from the van, eyes focused upon us from every direction. Walking up to the entrance Jane and Helga looked uneasy and I soon realised what it felt like to be an ethnic minority in another country!

Inside the store and so relieved to escape the uncertainty of the car park we appeared to have stepped back in time. The store resembled something out of the 1950s, like being on an old movie set, so much different to the modern British supermarkets we had left behind. We didn’t take long to

gather up what we needed and went to the checkout. The assistant was in her late teens, her black shiny face dressed with her hair back brushed over an enormous plastic comb making her look like a missing member of the Shangri-Las pop group from the 1960's. She acknowledged us as, "not being from around these parts." I explained that we had just arrived from the UK to work for Habitat. Smiling broadly she wished us well before we hurried back to the van and into the apparent security of the street.

It was now after midnight, exhausted and insecure yet reassured that we were just minutes away from our new home we dropped Helga off at an old, rundown dwelling, which was in complete darkness. Having seen her safely inside we were off again down a poorly lit street over an uncontrolled railway line that completely dissected the road to a rambling, somewhat stately looking house of another era, albeit showing the signs of age and neglect and again in complete darkness. Hanging over the front door was a faded rustic plaque bearing the Spanish word 'Amistad' – *'friendship.'*

We had arrived!

As I reached for the door, the house lit up as it sprang open. Standing in front of us were four fresh smiling faces, Jon, Deric, Constance and Fred, All volunteers who had waited up through the night to meet us. The welcome was amazing as we were led into our new home and the communal kitchen for pizza. We chatted for a while getting to know our new housemates and to hear of others who would later

join us. By now it was nearing three in the morning, hardly able to keep awake, we said our goodnight's went to our room and literally fell into bed.

Over the next couple of days, having caught up on our jetlag, I began keeping a diary, a day by day account of our experiences in the States which I wrote up religiously. Still having that diary now, it is something that I read over and reflect on from time to time, a documented account of our life in Americus some three and a half thousand miles from home.

Jane meanwhile, met up with Graham whilst I was preparing for work on the construction site as a forty seven year old, with literally no construction experience save for hanging the occasional strip of wallpaper and emulsifying walls. I was worried, what use would I be, would I fit in, would I be accepted with a work team who I had established were so much younger than me, in their teens and early twenties? I needed some reassurance!

The Yard

Next morning in the company of Jon, we walked up to the Rylander Building, Habitat's headquarters, for Devotions, a morning praise and inspirational meeting where almost all of Habitat's staff would gather before going off to their respective places of work. I prayed for some support that day.

On arrival at 'the yard' there were some forty or so young volunteers gathering around chatting and laughing amongst themselves. Jon introduced me to several volunteers that morning but I still felt like a sore thumb, if the ground could have swallowed me up I would have gladly let it happen, that was until a tall, rugged, looking man, his face wearing the lines of experience and worldliness approached me. With arm outstretched and a hand like a shovel he welcomed me to the fold. "Harry is my name, former N.Y.P.D, you must be Jeff the policeman from England." I was staggered; here was a man of around my age, who was to take me under his wing. To my relief we never discussed the Police Service but he went on to introduce me to the team leaders, equip me with a tool belt and all that I needed to commence work before teaming me up with a work detail. With confidence restored, my prayers answered, I was never to doubt myself again. As I met up with my group, a lively bunch of five young Americans and a lovely Ecuadorian, I was drawn to a somewhat soiled, well worn notice on the dashboard of our truck. It simply said,

"Building Houses, Building Lives"

For me, it couldn't have been more apt.

Over the next week or so I got to know my new colleagues, all in their early years and full of fun. We worked on several sites together assisting in providing the finishing touches to a variety of houses that were nearing completion, but for me, my only true assignment was to build a garden shed, a far cry I thought from building a house. It's fair to say that for much of this time, Al, the foreman talked me through the safety procedures and taught me how to use power tools for cutting timber, how to fit hurricane straps to reinforce roof trusses and the cutting of vinyl siding, which is used to dress the exterior of the homes. It is surprising how quick one learns when being fully aware that very soon I would be called upon to use such skills, my time was yet to come!

At the office, Jane was finding life very difficult, the computer system was totally alien to her and she felt that other staff working in the office were light years ahead with technology. Jane, like me at the yard that day needed help which came following a telephone call one evening to Jane's American cousin Fred and his lovely wife MaryEllen, who live in Michigan, a three hour flight north from Americus. Here are two people who have long been very close to us going as far back as the early 1970s, when Fred, called upon us in Cardiff whilst looking up his family tree on return from service in the Vietnam War. Up until that point we had never known that we had an American family.

On hearing of Jane's plight they simply downed tools and flew south to Atlanta to meet up with us in Americus.

Throughout that weekend, MaryEllen sat along side Jane for hours in an empty office and brought her up to speed on her computer, whilst I took Fred on a tour of Habitat's projects and facilities. After Mary's patient assistance, Jane never looked back and went on to make great strides in her job often liaising with congressmen and other government officials, whilst performing occasional secretarial duties for Millard Fuller, the titular head and CEO of the organisation.

As for me, and so typical of Fred's kindness, he bought a well needed cooler box for my use on the site, something that I was to use throughout my time on construction in the sweltering, steamy heat.



MaryEllen coaching Jane at the Rylander Building

Smithville



The plot of land that fulfilled dreams

On Monday April 15th, on arrival at the yard, Harry collared me and whispered in my ear, “We have just cleared the land at Smithville; you are going to build a house.” Harry introduced me to some new additions to our team, all very experienced volunteers with one in particular singled out as my mentor. Big Mike was a tall, strong twenty something African American. He shook my hand and I asked him where he was from. “PA man, how about you?”

Recognizing PA as Pennsylvania I simply replied, “C F, Mike.”

“Where the hell is that?” he asked.

“That’s Cardiff in Wales; I took the letters from my Zip Code.”

His face illuminated like a lighthouse beacon as he put his arm on my shoulder chuckling, “I think we are going to get on really well Jeff,” which of course we did.

On arrival at the site, some of the guys who had set off before us had already started work fitting stilts into the foundations. There were ten of us in total and in what seemed like in no time at all, the entire timber floor was being laid. Mike gave me my instructions on how to lay the floor panels and with hammer and nails, some up to six inches long, I set about tapping them down like a master craftsman. Mike, looking at me in absolute disdain, asked if I had ever seen a hammer before! Saying that I had, he grinned and offered his advice.

“Look Jeff, you hold it like this,” placing his huge hand around the end of the shaft. “Now, get on your knees, line up with the nail and swing from your shoulder. I want those sixers nailed down in three; if you keep on tapping away like that we will never meet our deadline.”

Mike had spoken, I had received a wake up call and we went back to work. I watched Mike as he drove the nails home and whilst I never quite achieved Mike’s prowess with the hammer, I soon got my ten taps of the nail down to four firm hammer blows. He was pleased!



Big Mike keeping a watchful eye on his apprentice

Old Ronald

The following day, I noticed that in addition to our work crew an elderly black man was working on site, his black hair was wiry with patches of grey running through the sides. From where I was working he looked to be the ‘eyes of age’, his face deeply lined, his arms thin and skin creased, I asked Mike who he was. “Don’t know Jeff, may be the homeowner putting in his sweat equity.” I recalled reading that one of the principles of ownership with Habitat for Humanity in lifting oneself out of poverty housing, is to empower oneself by taking ownership and responsibility for their new property. The homeowner is obliged to put in many hours of labour time in the construction of their new home, hence, ‘Sweat Equity.’

I couldn’t leave it there, I had to approach the old chap and speak to him myself. As I walked alongside of him I simply stated my name and asked of his. As he struggled up from the floor he took a stance of a man whose body was bent, his back broken, unable to straighten up. As he stooped forward, his hands tightly clenched and firmly placed against his legs as though trying to stand to attention and looking directly at me he said, “My name’s Ronald, Boss,”

Taken aback by this I replied, “Hey Ronald, I’m not your boss, my name is Jeff, and I have come all the way from England, (thinking that he may not have heard of Wales) and I am here to help build this house for you.”

Again looking at me and in his deep southern drawl he said, “I’d rather call you Boss, Boss and besides, dis ‘aint my

house, dis my neighbour's house, Dulcie, but Habitat say if I help my neighbour then they will build me a house even at my age, when all I want is a roof that don't leak and windows that I can open in the heat of the sun."

I was rocked backwards, feeling the emotion welling inside of me I fought back the tears. Ronald looked well into his twilight years although I later discovered that he was much younger but had aged considerably through poor diet and working outdoors in the sun for many years.

Ronald lived nearby in an old rundown property, something that was becoming common place to me now but his words kept resonating in my mind. Here was a man with such moderate expectations in his life. Old and weary but still able and willing to help his neighbour Dulcie, who I was yet to meet, by helping in the build of her new home.

I was deeply humbled by this experience.

That night, whilst lying in bed I could not get old Ronald's image and words out of my mind, it was pitiful. "Now I can see why I am here" I mused, before going on to pray and thank the Lord for this opportunity and to ask for the mental and physical strength to help to carry it through. People like Ronald and many more like him were living lives of debasing poverty and how I wanted to assist in providing them with a simple, decent place that they could call 'their home.'

After meeting with Ronald, my whole life became charged with inspiration and energy, to get on with the job was now my raison d'être. Jane equally inspired and looking so much happier with her lot, now having got used to her role at the Rylander, offered up her spare time on weekends. After a short training course for 'Women on Construction' she would join me on site on Saturdays to offer what ever help she could.



Ronald, Dulcie Willis and her daughter on site.



Jane lending a hand.

As for the house at Smithville, I was now cutting my teeth in house building with Big Mike giving me more and more responsibility, but it wasn't until after my first 'ten thousand nails,' and badly bruised left hand, was I able to go to the 'top of the class and work on the roof.'

At the foreman would check everyone's work to ensure we were meeting the high standards set by Habitat and there was one occasion I recall, when to my embarrassment, I was told to dismantle some roofing ties that I had proudly fitted and start again. To my credit, that was the only time my work was questioned and as I developed I became quite adept at cutting and fitting vinyl siding, a specialism you might say, and even had trainees of my own.

It was whilst working on site that I began to get to know the intended homeowner Dulcie Willis and her family.

Dulcie, a larger than life lady with a beaming smile, was always happy and never short of something kind to say. She worked daily, for many hours on site, sweeping, clearing away rubbish and doing literally whatever chore that was required of her. Her eldest son, who was in a regular job would come and help whenever he could, cutting timber and hammering down a nail or two. Dulcie meanwhile showed a heart of gold, often bringing a billycan of 'pork and beans' to share amongst the team.

We would sit and chat during our rest breaks most days and whilst she would sometimes refer to the struggle she faced in bringing up her family, Dulcie never moaned but just

reinforced the faith she had in Jesus saying that, “He would take care of everything.”

She was truly a delightful lady.

Despite her outer demeanor as a happy-go-lucky individual Dulcie lived an impoverished existence with her family, yet irrespective of this, was filled with hope and inspiration for better times ahead. There was a wonderful camaraderie on site, as we would sing our way through the working day’s highs and lows. Dulcie of course, forever productive, proved to be a ‘demon with a paintbrush’ and not always an accurate one as often we would have to come to her aid! The most important thing for us however was that her ‘heart was in it’ and as we were all in this together, who could ask for more?



Jeff working on the roof trusses.

Every day Life

Life was not all work and no play in Americus; we needed to socialise amongst our new found friends and of course, keep in touch with Laura. Food, was something we had to take seriously in as much as we were all on very tight budgets and our only source of income from Habitat would come in the way of a '*Pig Cheque*', which was issued to all volunteers every two weeks.

The term *Pig Cheque* came about as it was a 'shopper's cheque' to the value of around twenty dollars to spend at the Piggly Wiggly store. Needless to say it was never going to buy us much. To overcome this, we grew our own vegetables in the garden, corn, aubergines, tomatoes and peppers were in abundance and there was much for all to enjoy. We even had a large Pecan tree, so if you happened to like nuts, it was a source of plenty when in season. Habitat provided the cleaning materials for our house so we were very lucky in only having to use the cheque for consumables. Purchasing only what was needed; we avoided luxuries, just a basic diet of wholesome food.

We would often shop with Helga, who had by now moved into Amistad with us, each week we would pool our resources and share dinner at the same table, often with Jon and Deric, Fred and Constance our original housemates. This proved very successful for both our economy as well as interaction; it is fair to say that we never went hungry and always had plenty to talk about.

Another positive feature of community living was to be found in 'Pot Luck' nights, where occupants of different houses would invite 'another house' along for the evening. We would all take something to eat and drink, lay it out on one big table and take pot luck in what you actually ate. The sense of community and belonging was integral to our cause and became a weekly highlight.

It was at one such evening that we learned that former President Jimmy Carter, whose family home is in Plains Georgia, just a short drive from Americus, was to preach at his local church, the Maranatha Baptist. President Carter is a dedicated Patron of Habitat for Humanity and committed to its cause. We just had to attend.

On Sunday May 5th, all of Amistad went to the Maranatha for morning worship. It was a surreal experience. As we entered the grounds of the church we saw several Secret Service Agents in our midst, with lifetime protection being afforded to former Presidents it was I guess inevitable.

After prayer and the singing of hymns, President Carter stood at the pulpit to take the lesson. In the course of doing so he invited all visitors to stand and one by one spoke to each individual in turn, asking where they were from and why they were in Plains, Georgia. The Church was full of those from across the US and a few Europeans. When it came to my turn, I simply told the President that I was from a country far smaller than some of the states in the US, namely Wales in the United Kingdom.

I was taken completely by surprise when the President asked if that might be South Wales, acknowledging, he went on to tell how he would often visit the Vale of Glamorgan when returning from overseas assignments as he had a friend who had a “homestead” there. He went on to tell of how he would often stop over for some friendship and relaxation before continuing with his journey. I sought to explain to the President that Jane and I were serving as volunteers with Habitat and he applauded our commitment.

President and Mrs Carter are devoted supporters of Habitat for Humanity and have been since 1984 when he led a work project in New York City to renovate a building, housing some nineteen families. From there came the Carter Work Project which has been internationally recognised ever since and his continued commitment to Social Justice.
(Wikipedia / Habitat for Humanity)

After the sermon it was announced that the entire service was available on audio tape for those who were interested, needless to say I was first in the queue.

Whilst in the grounds and just as we were about to leave, Jane and I were approached by one of the secret service agents. “Mr President has asked if you would like to have your photograph taken with both himself and his wife Rosalynn, the former First Lady.” Stunned by the offer we were delighted to accept and Jane and I soon found ourselves standing with the two dignitaries, a photograph which holds pride of place in our living room today.



The two of us with President and Mrs Carter

Getting around Americus was difficult, until the day when we raided our savings account in the UK and purchased a car. Jane suggested a local dealership, the manager of which she had become acquainted with through Habitat business. Introduced by Jane, I went on to strike up a deal and purchase a charming, yet modest second hand ‘Geo Storm’, a lovely little economy car so rare in the States as it had a manual gear box with shift stick.

After passing our driving test at the local Sherriff’s Department and obtaining a US driving license we were all set. What an asset it proved to be, shopping became so much easier in an air conditioned vehicle and on weekends when not at work, it gave us the opportunity to explore further afield.

One such weekend we drove down to Savannah the largest city and County Seat of Chatham County in the US State of Georgia established in 1733. With its Atlantic seaport and steam boats still sailing the Savannah River, it was bliss. The Historic district, full of character with beautiful architecture was perfect for walking, as we strolled the ‘port side’ in the company of Helga, who had travelled with us. Entertained in the evening on street corners by the most fabulous blues and brass bands that seemed to inject that certain ‘je ne sais quoi’ into almost every aspect of old town America, was something to behold and certainly not to be missed.

Another feature of our social life became apparent when our Irish friend 'Noel called to ask if we had ever heard of 'Pat's Place,' a somewhat rundown 'pool bar' on the outskirts of town. Of course we hadn't but Noel went on to tell us how he was going to 'liven things up' on Tuesday nights by taking his guitar along for a sing song. With great gusto, we said we would be there.

On the first occasion there were no more than eight or so people inside but the presence of volunteers that night swelled the numbers to around twenty. Noel, who had a soulful, throaty voice, sang and played throughout, it was a lovely evening and everyone went home happy for the experience

The following week, the numbers were up to around fifty, word was getting around; Pat's Place was catching on. By the third week, Noel had advertised it widely throughout the Rylander, the Yard and the neighborhood, he even coerced other volunteers who played musical instruments to come along and take part.

Forming a band known as the 'Wild Things', Pat's Place became the hottest ticket in town, with the place packing people in such numbers, many were forced out onto a small courtyard on the front of the premises but on those hot sultry nights no one seemed to care.

Noel however was frantic, his voice broken with laryngitis he desperately needed a singer. Thinking that all Welshmen can sing, he pulled me aside, thrust the microphone in my

hand and the rest is history.

I continued to accompany Noel on vocals until the end of our stay. Jane and I never missed a Tuesday night, Pat the owner of the bar was delighted with his new found custom and the social scene in Americus had reached new heights and would never be the same again.

These were great times!



Jeff on vocals at Pat's Place

The Doctors Surgery

Back at work, each day began as usual with Devotions before going to the Yard; I could never miss this, to gather together at the start of each day just seemed to add emphasis and purpose to what we were all doing out there.

From the yard we would travel to Smithville to continue our efforts on Dulcie Willis's house, by now the walls were well and truly in place with the roof trusses on and the shingles to follow we were really making progress.

With the temperature in the upper nineties Fahrenheit, I was feeling the strain. The perspiration was literally running off the back of my neck, down between my shoulder blades on to my legs and into my boots, it was very hot for construction work with extremely high humidity.

I don't actually recall what happened that morning, other than being picked up from the floor and taken into the shade. With my mind in a haze, there was only one place for me and that was to seek medical advice. One of the lads drove me into a small town about five miles away, it was a poor, rundown neighborhood and what with the number of young people just hanging around on the streets, unemployment must have been high. Despite this, the surgery, a prefabricated shelter, was clean and air-conditioned, with both a nurse and a doctor in attendance.

After registering with the receptionist, I was invited in to an examination room to be met by a nurse. Putting me on a

scales to check my weight, she took my blood pressure, examined my eyes checked my reflexes, in fact she gave me a thorough examination; All I was thinking of was the expense of health care in the United States. Of course we had insurance, but it wasn't going to cover every eventuality and I just kept worrying about the cost.

The doctor was a very softly spoken lady in her thirties. She read the notes made by the nurse and went on to check my blood pressure again. We got into conversation as to what I was doing in America; we discussed Habitat and the work that both Jane and I were involved in. I even told her of the house in Smithville and some of my experiences; she listened intently, her face focused directly upon mine as she appeared to have empathy with my every word.

After our conversation, she confirmed her diagnosis, I had suffered heat exhaustion and my blood pressure was well above where it should have been. She suggested some medication and that I would need to come back to the surgery for further monitoring. I just saw dollar signs rolling up before my eyes and told her of my concern.

It was then it happened, remembering the scene so clearly, she opened a steel cabinet, reached inside and handed me two packets of tablets. As she placed them in my hand, she looked at me and said, "Jeff, have you seen the state of this town, just go and build more houses, this area needs people like you, don't even concern yourself about the cost; I will see you in three weeks."

Stuck for words, I thanked the Doctor for her compassion and generosity.

As I walked away towards the waiting car I just thought of the many happenings that had touched my heart since arriving here. The events and people that I had encountered were impacting on me from every direction, my outlook on life, never to be the same again.

Despite my new found sense of purpose, I was still prone to periods of deep depression and anxiety with extreme highs only to be followed by falling to such depths that I would have to 'look up in order to see the bottom.'

This was a characteristic of my illness and I just hoped and prayed that it would not take hold again and ruin this opportunity. Taking my anti-depressant medication regularly, there was still considerable vulnerability in my life, yet, somehow I could sense a gradual improvement, a lightening of the load the intensity of which was not quite as strong as before but still there.

My ability to climb back to a gradual feeling of wellbeing I believe was being brought about by my exposure to the plight of others and their dogged determination to get on with their lives. All this was helping me to shoulder the burden more easily; a burden which thankfully became lighter by the day.

“Hey Habitat”

Sometime in May, after a long day working on Dulcie’s house and feeling increasingly fatigued from the intense heat, I returned to the yard before walking back to Amistad.

Not fully concentrating on my route, I took what I thought was a short cut along the side of a railway line that runs through that part of town. Soon, feeling that I just might have got it wrong, I made my way on to an adjacent street. Unfamiliar with my whereabouts, and feeling a little uneasy, I could see that the street was empty and particularly quiet. I spotted an elderly man on his porch just sitting and taking comfort from a pipe from which he was smoking, he didn’t say anything as I passed by but I could feel his eyes following my every footstep. Across the street was another negro lady sweeping her porch, her hair in a scarf tied up at the front wearing a pale coloured pinafore over a pretty pink dress. She muttered something to me but I was unable to grasp what she said as I smiled and carried on my way.

Meandering along the dusty road, constantly looking for a landmark to direct me back towards ‘Oak,’ the street where we lived, the silence and hot humid air was broken by the sound of loud thumping music. Some fifty yards ahead of me on the opposite side of the road, standing on the porch of a quite modern looking, yet simple style bungalow were a group of around six black youths. They were boisterous, their bodies popping to ‘Rap’ music blasting from a large portable boom box held on one of the lad’s shoulders.

I felt apprehensive, were they staring at me? I looked behind to see if there were any other people on the street that just might have been their focus of attention but it remained deserted. Not happy with the situation I continued cautiously in their direction.

Ahead, in the distance I could see a rusty water tower that I associated with the railway, and believed that it just might be the one on the track close to Amistad. As I inched my way towards to the group, I could hear their voices and laughter; I was convinced that they were laughing at me. Outnumbered and concerned that I was likely to be “rolled,” I began to slacken off my tool belt ready to drop it and run through some waste ground ahead towards the water tower if approached. As I nervously walked along side of them on the opposite side of the road, my eyes focusing straight ahead, a shout rang out...

“Hey Habitat, what’s happening man?” I stopped in my tracks as I looked over my shoulder to where they were standing.

“Come on over, you’s welcome man.”

I could not believe what I was hearing, nervously I walked towards them.

“Come on in and have a soda.”

The older man in the group asked, “Where’s your lady?”

Completely blown away by their reaction, I responded, “How do you know that I’m with Habitat?”

“Hey, we know everything around here man,” as they laughed together. “We’ve even seen you in the morning with your lady walking up to the Rylander.”

“You know of the Rylander?” I exclaimed.

“Why sure, don’t you know? we all live in Habitat houses too man?”

Staggered, I stopped to chat with them for a while. We shook hands and wished each other well before I sought directions back to Oak and made my way home.

Feeling far from pleased with myself having failed so miserably, I couldn’t understand how I had misread the situation so badly. This was my first test of prejudice. By having wandered from my usual route only to find myself faced with a group of loud, exuberant black youths, it was crazy, I simply presumed that they were up to no good. In fact, all they wanted to do was befriend me. It was a well learned lesson, and whilst caution would always be my watchword, I hoped never to repeat that kind of mistake again.

Farewell

By the end of May, many things were happening in and around Americus, Dulcie Willis's house was nearing completion, with about five weeks work left to go, Jon was planning to move on to a new project in Colorado, and I was approached by HR regarding a new position at the Rylander, with a view to joining a team preparing for Habitat's 20th Anniversary celebrations in Atlanta. Flattered by the offer, I talked it over with Jane and her boss Graham who was very supportive and suggested that given the approaching 'storm season', where temperatures could be expected to reach over one hundred degrees, it might be in my best interests to accept the move if only to alleviate my continued blood pressure problems.

I was torn, but after much thought, and acknowledging that I would be of no use to anyone if my blood pressure was to worsen, I accepted the offer gladly and commenced my new job two days later.

With just one day left on construction, I knew that I had to speak to Dulcie Willis and tell her that I would be leaving. Thinking she would be at work that day I planned to meet up with her on site. Unknown to me, Dulcie wasn't due at work that morning and this, my last day at Smithville! I just had to locate her.

Most days after work I would often watch Dulcie make her way to an old rundown house just a short walk from where we were building. Thinking it was her home, I strolled over.

On knocking the door a lady appeared and I asked to speak to Dulcie Willis. The lady looked with curiosity saying.

“Dulcie don’t live in dis house Boss, she lives down the dirt road, in the red house,” pointing to an unmade single track trail barely wide enough for my vehicle a few hundred yards away.

Thanking the lady for her trouble I jumped into the work truck and began to negotiate the ‘dirt road’ with its deep ruts and disintegrating camber caused by a succession of downpours that had sadly never been rectified or made safe. It seemed to me that if you happen to live in a shack then life’s expectations were virtually non existent.

After a half a mile or so I came across an old red bungalow set aside on the right and perched on a patch of rough grass along side of some red dusty Georgia clay. It looked extremely run down and shabby. Making my way towards the front of the house, there were some children’s toys broken and discarded on the ground, a couple of old dilapidated chairs and a front door held on to its hinges with sisal. The windows, cracked and dirty were held together with tape across the glass panes to prevent them falling out and the roof was bowing in the centre like an inverted ship’s sail on a boat about to sink. The whole house looked dilapidated and unsafe. I knocked the door several times but got no reply. Peering in through the spiders web of what stood for window panes I looked for any signs of life. I could see several lengths of wire hanging from a hole in the ceiling from what must have at one time been a light fitting.

From the ceiling the wires trailed across the floor to what I could just make out as some old electrical appliances. The risk of fire I thought must have been immense! There was very little furniture with virtually no home comforts.

Without response, my head held low, and feeling somewhat despondent, I turned away and walked slowly back to my truck.

Shaking my head in dismay, I continued across the dust patch intending to leave. Suddenly and without warning a figure appeared from the shade of the side of the house, it was Dulcie Willis. She shouted as she hurried towards me waving her hands in the air and threw her arms around my shoulder crying, ***“Oh Jeff, I so didn’t want you to see me in dis place.”*** With tears in her eyes, she took hold of my hand and held it tightly. I sought to console her, telling her not to worry and that very soon she would be the owner of a brand new house, a home that she and her family would feel proud of.

We chatted for a short while, explained my imminent departure for Headquarters and impressed upon her that I would never forget all the hard work and effort she had put in to achieve a decent place in which to live. She wiped away her tears, smiled, and I moved on.

Such pride I saw in Dulcie that day, she had wanted to shield me from the embarrassment of her appalling living conditions and yet every day on the construction site, she displayed such warmth, humour and humanity, without as much as a single complaint. A truly a remarkable person!



The Red House on the Dirt Road

Moving On

The following day I was to commence my new job. Excited, both Jane and I attended Devotions as usual, where to my surprise, I even got a mention in ‘announcements’ of my new position and a ‘thank you’ for the hard work on site. We felt very proud.

In planning for the August Anniversary celebrations, I became aware that its profile was to be enhanced by the presence of President Carter, Ambassador Andrew Young, and the State Governor. The programme featured a string of inspirational speakers such as Dr Tony Campolo, a well-known Pastor, acclaimed author and eminent sociologist. To conclude the event there was to be a concert with Kenny Rogers and his band as the headline act. With such luminaries in attendance, it promised to be a terrific finale to what was to become a most memorable weekend.

Within days of the celebrations and in commemoration of Habitat’s Anniversary, it was planned to undertake a ‘Blitz Build’ of twenty houses in just seven days. This was a huge logistical, construction operation involving hundreds of volunteers from all across the United States and beyond requiring considerable skill, effort and planning in bringing it all together. Whilst familiar with logistics and planning in the police service, I had never been involved in anything on this scale in the field of construction but relished the thought. Thrilled at the prospect, and with so much to put in place, I immersed myself into my new role

The Church Burnings

Amongst the buzz of the Anniversary preparations, there was considerable talk and anxiety relating to a spate of church burnings which had brought massive destruction and the potential for community unrest all across the Deep South. With as many as thirty five Churches raised to the ground by fire, the work of deluded White Supremacy groups, a spin off from the Klu Klux Klan, it featured heavily in the news and was becoming a major concern to communities and those in Government circles.

President Bill Clinton who was in office at the time was on his campaign trail for re-election, and the murmur at the Rylander was that the President had invited Millard Fuller to meet with him in North Carolina to discuss this ever deteriorating situation and the notion of Habitat becoming involved in the Church rebuilding programme. At the office meanwhile, we were all waiting in anticipation of the outcome. On June 14th, it became clear that Millard had agreed with the President to offer whatever assistance he could, but by doing so, such a commitment would most certainly attract its own problems for Habitat.

Later that day one of Jane's colleagues, Rich, a senior member of staff, approached me,

“Jeff, have you heard that we are to get involved with the Church Building Programme?”

I nodded in agreement.

“Have you stopped to consider the implications for our own security here at the Rylander?” he asked.

Having only just heard of our commitment myself, I hadn’t really given it too much thought although I agreed of the potential risks associated with it.

Our somewhat uncomfortable conversation continued leaving me wondering where all this was going to lead.

“Did you know that local Police Department had already advised that if any staff were working late into the evenings they should provide them with their names and addresses, together with the tag and description of any vehicle they may have parked in the lot?”

Whilst I could see what they were getting at, I felt that in isolation such a move would achieve very little and much more was needed. Uneasy, I waited for him to continue.

“This is where you come in Jeff, you are the only guy in this organisation with sufficient experience to offer credible advice on security and there is to be a meeting with Millard and the Chief of Police next week in this building, don’t you think that you should make yourself available?”

I cringed, as my mind flashed back to Cardiff and how I felt before I left, recalling my inability to even look at a Police Officer let alone work with them again.

“I think that they will manage without me Rich.”

Feeling I was just not up to the task, I paused for a moment, and walked away.

Discussing it later with Jane; I explained how I felt, how uncertain I was about getting involved after all that I had been through. Jane, having listened to me simply said,

“Only you can make such a decision Jeff, but don’t lose sight of why and how you came to be out here.”

I retired to bed early that night but was unable to sleep properly, tormented by what had been put to me earlier. In the small hours, I guess it must have been around three in the morning, I was laying there, motionless, my eyes transfixed, just staring at the ceiling, when suddenly I sat bolt upright as though having seen a ghost. Waking Jane, I blurted it out.

“This is crazy, I had never built a house before I arrived here but have gone on to do so and now I am denying the very organisation that I have come to serve with the experience and expertise that they could do with in its urgent time of crisis.” “I must do it, I will do it!”

On Monday morning I made an appointment to meet with Graham Williams, the organisation’s number two, drawing his attention to my police career and offering whatever assistance I could. Expressing considerable interest in my involvement, he referred me to William, the Operations Director, for discussions. Having spoken with Will, it was agreed that both he and I would attend a meeting with

Millard and the Chief of Police in a few days' time to submit proposals. I felt both apprehensive and excited at the prospect.

On the morning of the twenty sixth of June, all fired up, I attended devotions. How I needed composure and strength that day. By 9.00am I joined a meeting with the CEO, Millard Fuller, the Operations Director, the Chief of Police for Americus, his Area Commander and the Chief of Detectives to discuss events. It was a high powered affair where much was said about the apparent threat and risk to the organisation and whilst initially a little uncertain, I contributed well to the discussion. During the meeting it was agreed that I should prepare and submit a draft Security Strategy as a matter of urgency.

Within days, Will, confirmed that my theme had been approved and that I was to make a presentation to Senior Management, the Chief of Police and his Commanders on how to take the programme forward. There was no doubting that I was expected to be the driving force behind the initiative and would be required to develop a Training Package for all staff with a view to early implementation.

I was delighted by the vote of confidence in me.

On leaving the building, The Chief invited both Will and I to his HQ to continue the discussion on the type of threats Habitat might face. From his earlier liaisons with the FBI, we established that they principally fell into three major areas of concern...

1. The possibility of a criminal attack, in the form of a letter or parcel bomb, received into the Mail Room by post.
2. The potential for a visitor to leave an explosive device in or around the building and given that the Rylander was a very public building, we had to ensure that any measures adopted, whilst remaining unobtrusive, would need to be sufficiently robust so as to both ‘prevent and protect’ with the capability to respond swiftly and calmly to such an event.
3. Then there was the potential of a threat or warning of an ‘impending incident’, made over the telephone, which would require our immediate and coordinated response.

To prepare and train for such an eventuality, I was given full unfettered responsibility and total support of the Police Department in preparing ‘dummy’ suspicious letters and parcels for training purposes, even to record threatening telephone calls was within my remit.

With the Chief of Police aware that my role would become a demanding, all embracing project, he offered me full access to his headquarters, with Will proposing to seek to incorporate me onto his permanent staff of the Operations Department at the earliest.

Things were happening and at such a pace. Now pivotal to the security strategy and appreciating the need for me to deliver, it was with the utmost confidence and reliance on

my years of Policing experience, that I relished the challenge.

Prior to leaving his office, the Chief of Police proposed that his senior officers would benefit from attending some of my Training Sessions and that I should incorporate them into the programme. Thinking that my plate was now 'more than full', he added a final request for me to deliver a series of talks to his officers at his Headquarters, commencing in the fall (autumn) some three to four months hence. My brief, to include subjects such as, The History of the British Police Service and Comparative Policing Styles to name just two, added another dimension to my new found responsibilities. Flattered, I acquiesced and so grew a very special professional relationship between us.

Hard as it may seem to believe, considering all that had gone before, I became enveloped in the programme. Gripped with a positivity of mind and free of the doubt and confusion that possessed me in those 'wilderness years', I was again working with my old profession, well and truly back in the Police family. It was as though I had come full circle and there was no going back.

Unknown to me however, there was so much more to impact upon my life in the weeks to come, the journey was only just unfolding.

The House is ready

June was a remarkable month, a new job on the Anniversary team quickly followed by the challenge of working with and alongside the Police Department, I was completely captivated.

At my desk one day, busy preparing visual aids for a presentation, my phone rang. Picking it up, I heard the voice of Delores, one of the ladies in the ‘Allocations office,’

“Jeff, did you once work on a house in Smithville for the Willis’s?”

“Why yes” I replied.

“Then it’s you, I’ve had Dulcie Willis in my office today and she said that she wanted Jeff, the one who speaks different to all the rest, to present her with the Bible at her house dedication next month.”

Initially speechless I responded,

“Of course, this is a great honour; I would be deeply privileged to accept.”

As the call ended, excited, I immediately rang William my boss, I just had to tell him the news. Congratulating me, he invited Jane and I to join both he and another valued friend Sylvia, the editor of Habitat World, at his apartment for

dinner that evening, an invitation which we were delighted to accept. After a splendid Italian meal, Will went on to explain to me the procedure of a House Dedication and what would be required. Drawn from his own personal experience, having attended many in the past he proved to be extremely helpful and as the evening drew to a close I went away fully aware of my requirements. It was a lovely end to a perfect day.

With the benefit of Will's advice, it was now for me to find the right lexis for the Dedication. Finding those words in the prayer of St Francis of Assisi, believing that they touched so many aspects of life and the life of Dulcie Willis in particular, they were just perfect for the occasion.

On Tuesday July 2nd the construction crew and members of staff gathered outside the new home. In well over one hundred degrees heat, and with very little shade, we waited patiently for the family to arrive. The atmosphere was electric as Dulcie, dressed in a fresh new soft pink polo shirt provided by Habitat, with its logo emblazoned on the front, joined us along with her family and friends including old Ronald.

Looking delightful, excited and full of joy and anticipation, Dulcie, with head held high, gathered her party together around the shade of her new front porch, like a 'mother hen' attending her brood. Completely in charge, cajoling, organising and fussing, she assembled them all together on what once was nothing more than an overgrown plot of land.

‘In her oils,’ this was *her* day, the one that she and her family had worked for stoically throughout many hard and steamy months under the hot Georgia sun. As the tension began to rise, Dulcie seemed momentarily to lose her characteristic smile as her face, now somewhat contemplative with her jaw and lips tightly closed as though trying to hold back any emotion. This remarkable lady ultimately let a tear fall on her cheek as she proudly stood there on the ‘threshold of a dream!’

I can’t recall at any time throughout my life ever feeling more uplifted by being present at such a momentous occasion. Here was a family previously beset by poverty and despair now about to start a new life in a fresh, clean, modern home empowered by their own *self help* and *personal achievement*.

As they stood there together, they quietly focused their attention on me.

With Bible in one hand and the key to their new home in the other I stepped forward to speak. I began by giving thanks to the Lord for this day, and for providing Habitat for Humanity and its team of volunteers with the direction, strength and fortitude in making this project possible.

Slowly I walked towards Dulcie and her family, standing alongside of her I commenced my reading;-

*“Lord, make us an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon; where there
is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and where there is
sadness, joy.*

*Where there is charity and wisdom, there
is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there
is patience and humility, there is neither anger
nor vexation. Where there is poverty
and joy; there is neither greed nor avarice.
Where there is peace and meditation, there
is neither anxiety nor doubt.*

*O divine Master, grant that we may not so
much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand; to be
loved as to love. For it is in giving that
we receive; It is in pardoning that we
are pardoned.”*

St Francis of Assisi.

The Bible, now firmly in Dulcie Wills’s hardened, cracked, shaking hand, her face lit up like a sunbeam, as she took the key, inserted it slowly into the lock and opened the front door to her new home. The crowd spontaneously erupted with great elation and cheer as they burst into song singing

‘This is the Day’, (the day that The Lord has made) one of my favorite pieces of up-beat praise. This was followed by a beautiful young girl from the volunteer party, standing forward of her group to sing solo, ‘America the Beautiful.’ The mood was one of utter joy as the assembly, through amity and affection for the whole of the family, added that extra dimension to this wonderful occasion.

I don’t know if such a scene of love, friendship and achievement could ever be replicated again in my life, but on that same day, not far from where we were standing, two other House Dedications were taking place with equal happiness and vigour, their ‘shacks’ now confined their ghastly, indecorous past. With the feeling so sweet, I considered myself truly blessed.

Inside the house a table of food had been prepared by the family for all to enjoy. Sitting together, we chatted endlessly, recounting with passion our many hours of sweat and toil which had made this day possible. Time flew by and reluctantly we said our farewells, leaving the family in the capable care of one of Habitat’s ‘nurturing’ staff, on hand to guide them through the initial stages of living in a new and fully equipped, modern family home.

As Jane and I made our way back to Amistad enriched by the occasion, I recalled that old shabby piece of paper on the dashboard of my work truck that morning at the yard which said, “*Building Houses, Building Lives.*” How those words came true today and in more ways than one.

Exhilarated, we drove home with radio playing, music filled the air. It was Tuesday; the evening was approaching and guess where we would be going?



?



Dulcie Willis and her family at the House Dedication



The Olympic Games

Time had moved on, it was Friday, July 12th and everyone at Amistad were up before six. We had arranged to start work a little later that morning, as this again was no ordinary day, if ever there was one in Americus.

Leaving the house by 6.30am Jane, Helga and myself walked into town where bunting adorned the small city streets as a carnival atmosphere began to build. Crowds gathered in front of the Windsor Hotel, Georgia's best kept secret, a grand and superbly restored Victorian building established in 1892 set proudly on West Lamar Street.

As the excitement intensified, bands played and singers crooned as the Stars and Stripes flew proudly in the breeze, for this was the day when the Olympic Flame was to pass through Americus and everyone wanted to be in on the act. The Fire Department in dress uniform took the salute as the street echoed to the words of 'God Bless America.' It was a moving experience, to see such a large, multicultural assembly, united in the name of sport.

At 8.00am precisely, the crowd roared as the flame, carried by a physically disabled man showing all the determination of a far younger individual, moved purposefully forward as he entered the spotlight. With arm outstretched like a parallel flagpole, he proudly held the burning torch in his grip as he passed it firmly on to a much younger, virile, local black athlete.

Taking up the mantle, he set off at pace carrying the emblem on high and into the hazy distance as he continued with the relay until it reached its eventually resting place in Atlanta.

As the Coca Cola sponsors stated in their promotional jargon, “I saw the flame,” as did Jane and thousands more like us. So impressed by the spectacle, we just had to go to Atlanta!

The games were staged from July 17th until August 4th, during which time Jane and I went to the venue early one Sunday morning to simply take a walk around Coca- Cola village and soak up the atmosphere. The area was literally thronging with people from all over the world.

With a heavy security presence in evidence, we mingled with the friendly, colourful, boisterous crowd, the ambiance electric!

Whilst in Atlanta that day we decided that we should take the opportunity to visit Dr Martin Luther King’s birthplace at 501 Auburn Avenue, on the northern side of Atlanta, and view the historic Ebenezer Church where he was baptized and later preached. I have always admired Dr King’s courage and leadership of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and for me it was a real must.

We approached a group of three security officials standing together in the Village one of whom was a police officer and asked directions. Concerned as to when we wanted to

go he was taken aback when I said, “*Today.*” He stepped aside and using his personal radio made reference to our request. On conclusion of the call, he beckoned us closer saying...

*“Sir, you may be better off waiting for a couple of days as we haven’t quite **secured** that area yet.”*

Stunned, I was completely taken aback with his reply. Finding it difficult to comprehend with so many police officers and military personnel on duty, literally on every street corner and with helicopters, their rotors chopping through the air, Auburn Avenue it would appear, was a ‘No Go’, at least for the time being.

I tried to equate the officer’s comments to my experience of policing in Humberside and South Wales and thankfully, whilst always having our ‘hot spots’ for crime and disorder, I don’t ever recall a time when we had ‘lost control’ of neighbourhoods.

We did eventually get to Auburn Avenue visiting both Dr King’s former home and the church, but not before a bomb outrage had struck the city killing one and injuring over a hundred.

In Auburn Avenue meanwhile and despite the awe inspiring feeling of walking in the footsteps of history, our visit was completely over shadowed by a large white plastic banner displaying the most provocative statement. Strewn across the side of some poverty blighted dwellings and so close to

the late, Reverend King's birthplace, the ugly sign read in bold black letters

**“Segregation and Prejudice is a Negro's Burdon,
and
America's Shame.”**

Appalled by such a declaration, I kept thinking that after thirty three years since the famous 'I Have a Dream' speech at the Lincoln Memorial such a graphic assertion was still being displayed in bold, unequivocal terms. I needed to pursue this further, but not there or then as there was not a white skin to be seen in the area and I thought it unwise to speak or even approach anyone on those poor, dirty, rundown streets, my presence perhaps, attracting little more than resentment, even anger.

Moving on I was distracted briefly by a small group of disheveled black kids sat beneath the sign and playing amiably on the sidewalk with what resembled a bunch of old stones and a few sticks of wood. In watching them play together in total harmony, I just could not help but think of their future. So much for *their* 'American Dream' I pondered!

On our drive home, Jane and I discussing what we had witnessed also spoke of the earlier bombing, an horrific act by any measure which, strange as it may seem, may have served as a wake up call to many Americans many of whom considered such violent acts were confined to Northern Ireland or the Middle East! It wasn't lost on the staff at the

Rylander either, a number of whom had previously questioned the need for greater security and so the abomination went some way to strengthen my cause. Arriving back in Americus, relieved to have left the mania of the big city behind, I later took my unanswered questions to the Chief.

Speaking at his office one day, I gently broached the subject and spoke of the banner in Atlanta's down town area. Attentive, he explained slowly that discrimination raises its ugly head in many forms these days and is more underground now than it used to be. Offering his own considered interpretation, he suggested that black people holding professional or high office in the community were unlikely to experience any resistance themselves in becoming involved for example, in joining a sports or golf club. Pausing momentarily, his face now somewhat saddened, he went on to say that there were still many hard-working black folk who because of their colour, would simply be 'put on the list' in readiness for a place when available. Unfortunately, to them, the call never comes.

Thanking the Chief for his explanation, I went back to my office to continue the conversation with another colleague who drew my attention to an incident that took place in Americus some weeks earlier. As I sat in uneasy silence, he recounted the time when one of Habitat's volunteer staff walked in to town in need of a haircut and despite there being a variety of salons to choose from, he simply walked into the wrong one.

Sitting in the barber's chair the client began chatting with the hairdresser, who, when not recognising his customer as a local man, asked "where are you from?"

"Massachusetts" he replied, "I'm working as a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity."

The barber, appearing outraged by this, froze in incredulity. With his face grimacing and using the electric razor that he was holding in his shaking hand, he pulled his client's head back, shaved off his right eyebrow and cut a furrow through the side of his hair just above his right ear.

The customer, outraged, and vowing to 'spread the word' as to the hairdresser's blatant bigotry remonstrated with him regarding his unprovoked assault. In response, and continuing his tirade of uncomplimentary remarks, the unrepentant barber ushered the victim forcefully off the premises.

It was plain that all was not as it should have been in the lives of many. Disturbed by what I had heard, and feeling helpless for others who may have faced similar treatment, I reflected on events as I walked home for the evening.

Life Goes On

A week later on August 3rd, celebrations filled the air again on the streets of Americus. Swimmer and local hero Angel Martino, an Olympic double gold medalist was ‘coming home’ and whilst the town was full of commotion with people thronging the streets, it was so much more sedate than our earlier time in Atlanta. Determined to watch the event, Jane and I chose to take a seat on one of the large upper balconies of the Windsor Hotel overlooking Lamar Street below believing that the reception was to take place there. Arriving early and unobstructed from entering the hotel or being prevented from using the balcony, we went on to make our selves comfortable.

It was a typically blistering August day as Jane and I chatted on the balcony in the cool of the shade for some forty minutes or so. Quietly, as though not to disturb us, an unassuming yet well groomed man appeared and placed a microphone and stand at the head of the loggia, just beyond where we were sitting. Making no direct reference to us, he retreated back into the hotel. I suggested to Jane that we should finish our drinks and look for another vantage point. No sooner than emptying my glass, another man appeared, tall, smartly dressed and wearing dark sunglasses. Thinking that I had perhaps met him somewhere before, I stood up asking if everything was alright?

“You are ok where you are,” he replied,” Mr President is happy for you to remain in your seats during the address.”

Taken aback, I looked at Jane pondering for a brief moment, “Isn’t he the secret service agent from the Maranatha Church?” As I did, President Carter and other civic dignitaries, followed by Angel Martino entered the balcony waving and smiling at the crowd outside. Firmly in our seats, Jane and I sat in awe as the President spoke. After some twenty minutes or so and upon leaving, he glanced in our direction, radiating that warm open smile so characteristic of Jimmy Carter.

It was unbelievable to be sat in the company of the former President of the United States for the second time in just a matter of weeks, and yet again, we were taken by his humility and grace.

After the frenzy of the weekend, our little town was beginning to return to normal as the celebrations were confined to history. Now back at work, Jane’s responsibilities and work load were becoming heavier as her function began to extend into Canada, Europe and the States of the former Soviet Union. With many staff and affiliates already ‘in country’, communication was at best difficult as she crossed time zones of many hours in order to converse with people in the field. Her job was certainly no sinecure as she continued to combine her secretarial duties for both Graham and Millard, a level to which she had never previously aspired.

As for me, with the 20th Anniversary event looming and my near fulltime commitment to the Operations Department, I was stretched and beginning to feel the effects of overwork.

Continuing at full pelt, little did I realise that I was on the precipice of a renewed bout of depression of an intensity that I hadn't experienced since leaving the UK. It was about to haunt me again. Rising each morning after a night of tossing and turning unable to settle, with that old familiar feeling of fear, confusion and self doubt, I was slipping badly. The oblivion of my past surely was not about to destroy my life again? I became desperate and if it were not for Jane, I don't think that I would have pulled through.

With so much happening at the office and the knowledge that people were reliant on me to deliver, I struggled like never before. After work, Jane would take me on long walks braving the bugs that filled the air at that time of year, as we meandered through the old rundown neighbourhoods to maybe watch a 'ballgame' or perhaps stroll into the 'affluent' side of town.

It was whilst on such a walk we were thrown, by a complete contrast in lifestyle. Beautiful, lush, tree lined boulevards adorned homes that could have quite easily justified their place on the film set of Graham O. Selznick's production of 'Gone with the Wind.' It was awesome, and proved to be a great distraction for us both as we strolled through the verdant sidewalks accompanied by the continuous chorus of crickets singing out in the hedgerows. Fresh white houses with picket fences, bold and pristine as though competing with one another for a place in a top real estate magazine, their large ornate balustrades oozing with character; it was just like a another world as they stood brashly on display.

The only thing missing perhaps, were the horse drawn carriages!

Confronting my recurring depression, I again began to see the light as I slowly rose from the depths, but this time I recognised more than ever that I needed to hold onto the middle ground and not to be overtaken by the phases of euphoria that so often would lead me into a false, artificial world. It was a true test of character. Will, as aware as ever of my battle and recognising that I was somewhat under par, went some way to lift my spirits by confirming that I was to relinquish any further responsibilities to the Anniversary project and work full time for him. This was a real bonus as steadily I began to lift from the gloom. Despite all of this I still had the Blitz Build in my sights, something that I knew that would take all of my strength if I was to take a meaningful part.

Attending church on a Sunday was something we enjoyed and served to consolidate my strength as we joined other friends at The Cornerstone Church on Southland Drive, Americus for morning worship. As visitors, we were made so welcome by both the Pastor and the congregation with the church itself packed to the gunnels. The singing was quite remarkable, backed up by a small orchestra or sometimes a band and channeled through the most incredible sound system equipped with mixing desk. The vibe reverberated around the church with the acoustics of a professional concert hall. Cornerstone was a Church like no other church I had ever attended, but for me it seemed like an 'up market model, a somewhat 'posh Church', with no

expense spared on beautiful ante rooms, furniture and kitchen, let alone the musical production suite. The congregation, themselves were well dressed and everything had a real ‘feel good factor’ about it, at least that was my perception. The pastor, for his part delivered some wonderful sermons with one in particular standing out. Focusing upon the poor, the lost and the down hearted, he made it known to everyone in attendance that ***“not all of God’s children had fine clothes or lived in privileged neighbourhoods.”*** In fact I was struck by the pastor’s honesty and openness in his prophesying that *“a change was going to come.”* He added that “we should all be ready to welcome those in our communities who may have fallen by the wayside, disheveled and unclean for it was they who needed our help and as Christians we should prepare ourselves for such a coming.” His words, resonating around this beautiful place of worship, were strong, powerful and thought provoking, invoking much discussion amongst the many that stayed behind to chat after the service.

After every visit he would write to Jane and I and no doubt other visitors, thanking us for our attendance, assuring us of a future welcome and closing with a blessing in Jesus’ name. I still retain those precious cards today.

As each day passed, edging closer to the big event, the atmosphere at the Rylander was almost tangible; everyone it seemed was caught up in the excitement! Jane and I meanwhile had a more personal event to look forward to, our Silver Wedding Anniversary, which fell on the same weekend as Habitat’s.

With such a clash on the calendar we rescheduled our own celebrations to commence a week earlier. We travelled down to the Florida Panhandle to commemorate our anniversary and after a lovely loving, sunny and warm weekend where we bathed in the balmy tranquil waters of the Gulf of Mexico, we were confronted by a huge contrast during our return.

Driving through the most ferocious storms, it was as though the heavens were gnashing their teeth, troubled and angry. The dark almost black sky illuminated, almost ghostly, as fork lightening ripped though the firmament, slashing a path of fiery splintered electricity before us as it detonated its thunder of an intensity of a thousand cannons.

Arriving on the forecourt of Amistad, in the early evening, the storm now well out of range having made its statement, we sensed an atmosphere of gloom pervading the air. Standing in the half lit hallway of our house, we stared into the sullen, morose faces of our housemates. Stepping inside, the words hard to bear, we were confronted with the most dreadful news. Jane's Dad had passed away!

It transpired that throughout the weekend the police had been trying to contact us but with no forwarding address they were resigned to leaving the message with our colleagues. Jane, frantically telephoning her brother in Cardiff, established that Cyril had died of a heart attack whilst we were away and his funeral was to take place the following week. The next morning at devotions the focus

was on her as prayers were offered up.

Quickly arranging flights, Jane urged me not to travel with her but to stay behind to fulfill my commitments to Habitat, something that I had to contemplate. That morning, whilst Jane was at the office tying up loose ends she discovered an envelope addressed to her on her desk. She opened it only to find five hundred dollars in bank notes but without reference from whence or whom it came. Rushing to my desk, where I was sat discussing issues with Will, she explained what had happened. Baffled by the find and unable to offer any explanation we were flabbergasted.

The brief silence was broken when Will, looking at Jane said, “Just go and do what is necessary and ask no more about it.”

Overwhelmed and speechless, this was a magnanimous gesture on behalf of Will and would certainly have more than defrayed Jane’s flying costs but we could not accept such generosity. As the day went by, Will and I had a ‘heart to heart’ and only under considerable pressure from us and with his great reluctance, were we able to convince him to return the money to his bank account.

To this day, in no time of my life, have I ever witnessed so much goodness exude from people and experiences encountered on our mission. Reflecting on the dream that I had, so long ago, I gave thanks in my prayers for delivering us into such a fold and for the many blessings that had come our way, praying that Jane would remain strong on her journey and for what was to come.

On Wednesday August 28th, our Silver Wedding day we were at the departure desk of a major European airline at Atlanta airport. At the desk a senior flight attendant seeing that Jane was distressed with tears in her eyes called me to one side. Explaining of Jane's urgent need to return home, he listened attentively whilst summoning another colleague. With great empathy and compassion, they offered to fly Jane first class to Amsterdam before taking the 'hopper' to Cardiff. Shaking their hands, what was I to say apart from thank you, words alone, just not enough?

Was there no end to such kindness I thought as I waved Jane farewell, raising her hand in response, I watched as she walked away before moving quietly into the executive lounge and out of sight.

As her flight climbed steeply in to the air, its ghostly vapour trail fading as the Jumbo reached beyond the cumulous, I felt awful, like a void within me, knowing that it would not be until September 10th before I would see Jane again.

With my heart aching for her return and glassy eyed, I turned away and headed for home.

Habitat for Humanity Twentieth Anniversary Celebrations

On Thursday, August 29th, together with the project team and many other support staff, we set off for the Georgia International Convention Centre the hub of the weekend's celebrations. Hundreds of supporters had by now already left having taken up the challenge to raise funds in a sponsored walk from Americus to Atlanta, a distance of over a hundred miles. For my part, I travelled in one of the many minibuses that were in use and headed north for the weekend.

Our first day at work was on Friday morning, it was registration day and with so many delegates in attendance there was much to do. Hindered by my thoughts of Jane's Dad's funeral taking place on Monday, I was very much preoccupied and down hearted without her.

The uplift for me that weekend came through a string of inspirational speeches; Millard was at his exceptional best motivating and encouraging people on for the next twenty years. Dr Tony Campolo meanwhile delivered a most rousing account of his emotional work with some of the abandoned South American 'street children' deprived of their childhood. With a rousing finish, so typical of Tony, he left every one inspired and stimulated to simply 'take up the hammer and build.' Something we were about to do in just a few days time.

During that weekend, we took some respite during which time myself, Helga and one or two others went down town to take a further and more in-depth look around the street where Martin Luther King was born.

Parking our car in a fully enclosed car park with a six foot wire fence obviously designed to keep unwanted visitors at bay and with a security warden, in evidence, we were advised to stay together in the neighbourhood and to keep to the designated visitors' trail. We explored the street of what was the cradle of the American Civil Rights Movement and despite feeling somewhat unnerved by the warden's advice strayed a little before entering the museum, its walls emblazoned with news articles and features of those disgraceful, turbulent times in American history.

In bringing it into focus, the most impacting documentation of all, apart from the banner that I had previously read, was the actual footage shown on screen of the hate and brutality brought to bear upon peaceful marchers all of whom were there in pursuance of equal rights. Beatings, lynching's, families torn apart and brutalised, I found the whole scenario abhorrent.

That evening back at the convention centre, the celebrations came to a finale as Kenny Rogers and his band took to the stage. It was a fantastic night as he rocked and crooned his fans through all of his old, well known numbers. During his

performance, Rogers announced that if he could identify anyone under forty in the crowd who was singing along to his songs, he would flick dollar bills at them. Needless to say, there were many that night that went home with more in their pockets than they came with.

By Monday, many of us were back in Americus preparing for the Sumter County Blitz, scheduled to start the following day, but without Jane, I seemed to have lost that ‘spring in my step.’

Next morning the whole house was up early and after a hearty breakfast we made our way to join up with the other volunteers for Devotions, which were to be held on site.

It was a dark, dank morn and the air was heavy with mist as we made our way down a poorly lit road lined by tall bushy trees, the hedgerows overgrown. The somewhat eerie atmosphere was lifted by the soft sound of music breaking gently then disappearing as it floated in and out of what had now become a slight, whispering breeze.

The darkness, not to be outdone, was itself interrupted by faint lights in the distance flickering intermittently between the leaves as the branches lightly swayed. Helga spoke of hearing voices in the distance. Stopping to listen, it was the sound of ladies singing, we were obviously just yards away from our assembly point and the venue for open air Devotions.

As we entered what looked like a clearing amongst trees,

there were already a hundred or so people assembled with more arriving from every direction, many of whom I recognised as local volunteers. The mood was one of quiet contemplation as all eyes and ears focused upon a small platform where a group of women were singing. It was just like listening to a dozen Mahalia Jacksons, their soulful gospel voices filling the sultry air. Accompanied by a guitarist, plucking and fingering away at the cords, they swayed the crowd through some of the most wonderful praise which became increasingly engaging, as more and more people joined our ranks.

A tall man standing along side of Helga asked if we knew why they were rejoicing, unsure I turned the question around to him. Responding he said with a huge smile extending across his black, leathery face...

“Cos they’ve gotten to the top of the list, praise be.”

My mind immediately took a double take as I thought of my conversation with the Chief and his analogy of the many people who never made it to the top. Relieved, I was again left wondering about fairness, equality and how such a basic right fits in to ordinary life around Americus.

As they finished the crowd now fully charged and vibrant, it was time to combine our collective energy and put our faith into action. After a final prayer and words of encouragement, in what had now become full daylight we eagerly joined our teams.

At this Blitz Build, like so many others, all the concrete foundations were pre-laid with huge steel containers parked alongside, each holding every conceivable component, including brackets, screws nails and fixings. At each container a volunteer was allocated as warehouseman or woman upon whose authority parts would be released.

Pre-made roof trusses were being loaded along side each plot with timber wall frames partly built and ready for erecting. Doors and window frames, dry wall and shingles, vinyl siding all donated by huge corporations and small businesses, it was all there, waiting for the hundreds of workers like ants, fetching and carrying, hammering and cutting to go on and build. In awe of it all I remember thinking to myself, “This is what it is all about.”

Across the site in a series of tents and marquees, ladies were busy preparing food and drink in huge quantities, again much of it donated by local individuals and businesses. As Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “An army marches on its stomach.”

Just after 2.00pm on our first day, in sweltering heat, a large open-back truck drove on to the site loaded to capacity, pyramid style with huge water melons. The driver, a local farmer and land owner climbed out shouting, “I really can’t afford the time to leave my land, but in a small way I would like to help by donating these melons for you all, I’m sure you will make good use of them in this heat.” Gestures like this and so many others were being made by ordinary folk from across the county, all serving to

demonstrate acts of kindness and generosity openly displayed to support the spirit and purpose of the mission. A far cry from the naked hostility of the barber shop! By day three, the entire site was a mud bath, the wash from Hurricane Fran had just clipped the local area causing variable amounts of damage and it was now a question of ‘catch up.’

Somewhat demoralised by the effect of the storm, we nevertheless rallied to a new level of achievement. Working with the home owner, Sharee, our team began to salvage whatever we could from the rubble and like the “rise of the phoenix” began its restoration. With confidence restored, her home began to take shape once more as very soon we made up on lost ground.

That same day, Sharee’s mother, a lady suffering from arthritis, came to her daughter’s plot. With a large heavy container of spaghetti and meatballs held in her swollen, disfigured hands she struggled towards us as she told how sorry she was for not being able to assist on the site but as a gesture of goodwill had cooked us lunch. Her kindness went down really well amongst the team.

By the end of an exhausting week my role and that of one or two others with me was complete, with electricians, plumbers and plasterers taking our place as they worked around the clock to get things finished.

Twenty houses in just seven days, it seemed like a miracle, given the scale of the task and the ever changing weather conditions, but we had done it, and very soon twenty families would be lifted out of poverty into a safe and secure home of their own. Unbelievable!

Jane's Return

With the 'blitz' complete, I continued to yearn for Jane. After work on Tuesday, September 10th, I enthusiastically made my way to Atlanta to meet her at the airport it was just fabulous to have her in my arms again, I had missed her so much! With Jane arriving late at night, Sylvia had organised for us to stop over at a friend's apartment in the city. It was a really thoughtful gesture and made for a perfect reunion before Jane and I returned to Americus.

As busy as ever at the office, it was in many ways a blessing in disguise, providing Jane with the distraction needed to take her mind off her recent loss and readjust into her former work style. The feeling for Jane however, now beginning to settle back into life in the Deep South, was brought into contrast by the reality of living in an old rambling house. During her first week back and whilst asleep in bed one damp, humid night she woke with a start as she felt something crawling on her head. Jumping from bed she screeched as she pulled out two cockroaches that had become entangled in her hair. In her panic, we saw two more on the floor; it seemed that we had been invaded by these dark, unsavoury creatures. Once calmed down I assured Jane that by morning I would deal with the problem.

True to my word and in the company of one or two others who had received *unwelcome visitors* during the night, we set about the skirting boards and other likely places of activity with boracic powder, an effective insecticide in the control of such creatures. Despite our best efforts however, these hardy pests continued to be a menace throughout our stay and Jane, forever cautious, never slept with her head near the window or above our dysfunctional air vents again.

Continuing with my work, it was as though I had become seconded to the Police Department spending many hours at the station as well as in the classroom at the Rylander. Having prepared the Operational Order and all the materials for use in training, the course was in full swing.

All two hundred or more of Habitats employees and volunteers drawn from the Rylander, its warehouses and district offices were inducted in Safety awareness. Then there was the Mail Room staff who, with the benefit of my props, the dummy letters and packages, were taught how to recognise potential letter or parcel bombs and of course how to react in such circumstances. Then there was the training of our telephonists and by using the tape recordings of sinister, threatening telephone calls complete with ‘identifiable background noises’ they were taught on what to listen for and again how to respond. It was a big task, but one which I thoroughly enjoyed and just in took in my stride.

Will and the Chief, so impressed with the innovations employed, discussed with me the notion of making a series

of films for use by the Operations Department long after my ultimate departure. Habitat certainly had a very well equipped Audio Visual Department so Will and I took our proposals to the Audio Visual Manager for consideration. With the full co-operation of, Vernon (Vern) as he was known, I was given the green light and together with his considerable production skills we went on to produce the four volume package, which later became a part of the training library.

The United Holiness Church

Attending Devotions and the Cornerstone Church gave both Jane and I a great feeling of consciousness and spiritual enlightenment. The amazing stories of faith and achievement shared by our International Partners (IPs,) our extended volunteers who would take the word, vision and purpose of Habitat around the world were laid bare for all to examine. At Devotions, on their return from far flung lands such as Africa, India and Papua New Guinea, they gave their emotional accounts of paucity and tribal influence, not forgetting the enormous hurdles to be overcome in caste conscious India as one by one, families were lifted from the scourge of poverty into a world of optimism. In many ways we were already ‘conditioned’ to what we heard, having grown up in a news-conscious society where images such as these were displayed on our TV screens daily. However, by explicitly recounting their obstacles to ‘change’ and their testimony of working with those suffering the inequality of the world, it was this that had the greatest impact. Painting the picture, if one were needed, the IPs told of how communities, brick by brick, straw by straw or by whatever material was ‘appropriate environmentally’ for use in building homes on those far away shores, would slowly rise from despair into a world of hope and respect. Their stories, coupled with our own experiences, again served to under- pin the expression that

by “building houses, we were all, wherever we worked in the world, building lives,” including of course the lives of our own!

Touched by every word and encounter experienced throughout our time with Habitat, it continued to keep our lives in perspective, for we were the lucky ones, privileged to be able to help others in need and to be a part of ‘Christianity in Action.’

Knowledge was something that I had a hunger for and whilst experiencing so much in Americus, I still felt that there was much more to learn. Having never set foot inside an American Gospel Church, I needed to attend a service in one of the suburbs, a church where we could pray and sing amongst a black congregation, so I took my request to our friend Sylvia.

Some days later I received a letter from the Pastor and Presiding Elder of United Holiness Church, Arthur Fulton. inviting us to attend a ‘Family and Friends’ Fellowship Day on Sunday, October 13th. Delighted, we attended and took part in what turned out to be a unique unforgettable service.

Leaving early that morning, we drove down to Aaron Snipes Sr Drive, in Americus Georgia, for a service that started at 10.30am and continued to around 2.00pm. The church was a modern, substantial, red brick building with a large parking lot, we made for the entrance. Feeling a little apprehensive and not sure why, we headed toward a large group of worshipers in their brightly coloured Sunday

best, who it transpired, had gathered to receive and greet us as we arrived. Overwhelmed with the most amazing welcome, they hugged and shook our hands as we were led into the vestibule and invited to take our pre reserved seats. With continued excitement, a group of ladies gathered in the aisle and spontaneously burst into the song, ‘Oh Happy Days,’ before taking to their pews.

Scanning the congregation, I could see that apart from our group of five there was only one other white face in attendance.

Prior to the Pastor arriving, one of his Deacons ‘warmed up’ the congregation in song. With microphone in hand, and without the benefit of a sound system and mixing desk he took the stance of ‘Otis Redding’ as he belted out his renditions of soulful praise. Many of the audience, clapping and singing took their energy back into the aisles as they sang and swayed and clapped to the cadence of the music. Never having witnessed such enjoyment exuding from a Church, save for that scene in the 1992 movie, ‘Sister Act,’ when after a solemn introduction to the song ‘I will Follow Him’, the nuns burst into an exuberant cascade of upbeat rhythm thrilling the audience, whilst leaving the Mother Superior somewhat bemused. It was a joy to behold.

Having worked his flock into heightened exhilaration the Pastor took to the pulpit. Welcoming the assembly and making a specific point of referring to us, he spoke firmly and directly as we were led into prayer. This was not a ‘fire and brimstone, preacher, but a warm, loving, purposeful

man offering up the words of the Bible with an interpretation that was both easy to understand and directly relevant.

After the first hour or so, came a brief intermission before the musical praise recommenced. The church, full with families and friends from all around, was a house of wonder and joy as the Deacon continued to drive the congregation.

Around mid-day the Pastor began his second address. With the firmness of authority of his office he began to raise issues that had been brought to his attention by members of his parish.

“There are members of this community that are not living up to their domestic responsibilities,” he stated.

The congregation completely still with not a shuffle to be heard, exuded an expectant silence for what was to come as we all hung onto his every word.

Going on to talk of men folk becoming lazy, and reneging on their obligation to their families, laying in bed when they should be looking for work and not finding the time to help in the chores of sweeping the yard and making more of their kids. He lambasted those who, “You know who you are,” without actually naming names.

Some of the ladies present standing next to the man in their lives would simply look up at their partners and with lips puckered, would nod their heads firmly as though to say,

“He is talking about you,” with the words ‘Aha, das right,’ being whispered around the hall.

The Pastor, not wishing to single out anyone in particular, invited every adult male present, to form a line in the aisle and slowly file towards him, as he spoke quietly into every person’s ear. For my part he offered a blessing which I am sure he did for everyone else present but there were those amongst us who would have felt just a little uncomfortable in hearing what else the Pastor had to say.

Back at our seats and with the blessings and admonishment complete the Deacon took over. The congregation needed to be refocused and uplifted again and there was no better person to do it than he. As the singing reached new heights it was like the dawn of a new day.

It was now around 1.00pm the longest service by far that I had ever attended and we were in the final hour. Offertory plates had been placed on to the dais as another Deacon entered to take his stance on the podium. The Pastor at the pulpit smiling, having joined us in song, was about to speak.

Referring to a single mother in our midst with a number of young children, some below school age, the pastor made it clear that “one of our brethren was finding life a huge struggle.” Explaining that whilst living on a main road, there had been a number of occasions when one of her offspring had ran off the ‘dirt drive’ and into the road, a

dangerous practice particularly for one so young. More recently however, it was said that the same child, by-passing some obstacles that had been placed on the drive by her mother so as to prevent any further occurrences, had run into the path of a passing vehicle escaping, thankfully, with little more than a few cuts and scratches. It was time for the Church to intervene, and so the pastor, his voice raised, his body animated as though making a rallying call to his troops, urged the congregation to put their beliefs in to action, and let their conscience guide them into generosity as the plates were passed around.

What a marvelous gesture I thought as this week's collection was to be used to purchase a new set of gates for the family to make the drive secure. To publicly use the offertory plates as a practical and meaningful way to help an individual or individuals in need, I willingly opened my wallet and Jane her purse to give whatever we could.

When the collection was complete the Deacons took the donations away to be counted, only to return a short while later congratulating the assembled in their kindness of their bounty but suggesting that the plates would need to be passed around one more time as the figure was just "a little short" of the required amount. With a wry smile I applauded the proposal and again opened my wallet.

With the service now complete, we met with the pastor, who is now a Bishop, (website research), and discussed the immense impact that the morning service and his own specific input had had upon us. Thanking us, he went on to

stress how he saw the importance of the Church not simply, though crucially essential, as a place of worship, but as a center for community life and an influence on people, their conduct and actions in accordance with Jesus' teachings. Driving back home to Amistad, I too left feeling influenced by the power of the lesson, and clearly saw the importance of the churches' leadership in life, something I had not fully considered before coming to serve here.

Americus - The Closing Months

Throughout October, life continued its hectic pace, so busy at work preparing for the ‘shoot’ of our next film in the series, teaching in class and visiting the Police Department for my presentations, I was full of it!

It was also an eventful time for Jane of course, who, for ever breaking new ground, came home from work one day to explain how she had spoken on the phone with Newt Gingrich, The Speaker of The House of Representatives and well known as the architect of the ‘Contract with America’ and his support of ‘Social Causes.’ Telling of his commitment to Habitat and other related projects, she said that it was as though we were reaching the crescendo!

Socially, we continued to enjoy, although saddened by the recent departure of Helga who, with her time up, had returned to Germany, leaving our quarters at Amistad somewhat empty. Nonetheless, what with communal barbecues, pot luck suppers and of course Tuesday nights at Pat’s Place, which continued in full swing, we gradually moved closer to our impending departure.

It was whilst at Pat’s one busy evening, the crowd, shoulder to shoulder, that two ladies in their thirties and lecturers at the University of South West Georgia popped their curious

heads around the thronging entrance. Enquiring as to the whereabouts of the Irishman and the Welshman, Noel and I invited them in. From that brief encounter, they explained how word of our musical nights had ‘got around’ and asked if we would be willing to ‘do a gig’, albeit unpaid, at the University’s Department for Asian Studies; we gladly accepted. The ‘gig’ proved to make for a fabulous evening, filled with song, and accompanied by a very appreciative audience of around fifty foreign students, as we chanted our way through our somewhat dated but well received repertoire.

Our reward that night, a lovely, albeit a little small, bright yellow T` shirt, with the department’s appellation emblazoned on the front, which later occupied pride of place in the closet. In spite of my being over six feet tall and regardless of its slender cut, obviously for the oriental market, it hugged every contour of my somewhat outsize frame as I occasionally wore it at Pat’s Place standing tall for all to see. I just had to show it off. Fame at last!

By the end of the month Noel, now an IP, had departed for Kyrgyzstan, a land locked and mountainous state in Central Asia, to set up an affiliate for Habitat. Tuesday nights however, whilst not quite the same without Noel, were kept alive by the talents of other local musicians as Pat’s remained on center stage of the local social scene.

With so many of our original friends either having left for whence they came, or moved on to other projects, I couldn’t help but think that soon it would be our turn and

with thoughts of mixed emotions, we began to look east and to our lives back in Wales.

October was now drawing to a close and we were in many ways preoccupied with the forthcoming arrival of Laura, who was due to land at Atlanta in just a matter of days. Interestingly, we had been asked if she may be willing to help out at Habitat's nursery, 'Educare' as there was a desperate shortage of trained staff. Laura, without hesitation, was thrilled to assist.

At the airport on Sunday, third of November in the arrivals hall, Laura, her face lit up with that unmistakable smile burst through the doors. Looking absolutely gorgeous, tanned and so healthy we embraced our way through an emotional reunion of hugs and kisses. On leaving the airport, we thrilled her with a fascinating detour amongst the beautiful Atlanta skyline before 'talking' our way back to Americus and what would be the final phase of our mission.

Laura took to Americus really well and soon settled in at the crèche. Accompanying us whenever we had free time we happily explored the town and its environs, with most evenings spent at various people's homes as we were entertained by friends over dinner as part of our send-off.

With the security projects complete and the films in the 'can', I had just one more presentation to make at the Police Department. I remember the subject well; it was on Public

Disorder, a field in which I had considerable knowledge and experience from my policing days. In the lecture theatre that day, the seats were taken by officers of all ranks, from Patrolman through to Deputy Chief, the Chief of Police himself having been called away urgently on business.

As I carried the audience through each phase of my delivery, their attention was broken momentarily as the Chief of Police surprised us all by unexpectedly entering the room. Taking his seat, he urged me to carry on until finished. I was chuffed, despite his being earlier called away he still made it back in time to listen to the final stages of my presentation. After taking questions from the floor, I stepped aside from the rostrum as the Chief took over.

His comments, directed at me, were overwhelmingly complimentary. Leaving me feeling somewhat embarrassed with the tribute, he went on to address his officers. Speaking briefly of my illness, something that I had rarely spoken about but never deliberately sought to hide; he explained that initially, I was a ‘reluctant player’ in the security challenges faced by Habitat.

The Chief suggested that as human beings we are all vulnerable, and that anyone in attendance that day, despite the ‘John Wayne’ can do attitudes that prevail in the service, could be faced with similar setbacks in life. He made the point that, “as in Jeff’s case, there are ways forward if one is prepared to look.”

Flattered, the Chief turned to me. Shaking me by the hand as I stood under the City Crest and the Stars and Stripes of the flag of the United States, he presented me with a wonderful wooden plaque overlaid with a polished metal plate upon which the following words were engraved...

Presented To

JEFF BARLEY

In appreciation for

Outstanding Service

To The

Americus Police Department

You are hereby recognized

As an **Honorary Member** of the

AMERICUS POLICE DEPARTMENT

November 7 1996

~

Humbled by such an honour, I offered my appreciation, and thanked the Chief and his Officers for their unyielding support throughout my stay.

Thinking of how it had taken a journey of some three thousand miles and all the anxiety and planning that went before it; I had now more than completed the circle. Finding it hard to believe, I meandered back to the office.

It was a strange feeling as I walked along Lamar Street not sure whether I should feel happy or sad, just like floating on air as I passed by the grand Windsor Hotel in all its glory with so many memorable images in my mind. Flashing back to those heady days when ‘we saw the flame’, and on the balcony with President Carter, not to forget the thrill of building Dulcie’s house, it all had a weird feeling of finality about it leaving me a little pensive and unsure.

“This is silly,” I thought as I was reminded of the many blessings that had befallen me. With shoulders back and a bounce in my step, I walked positively into the reception area of the Rylander Building where, purely by chance, Will was standing as though waiting for me to arrive. Inviting me to join him for coffee with both Jane and Laura, we walked over to Charlie’s, a traditional American diner, which we had frequented many times, to eat, drink, and discuss the events of the day.

As it all began to sink in, the tapestry was almost complete. The dream which had brought such enrichment to us both, the opportunity to work along side others in chronic need and the holistic impact of the overall experience had been woven. Forming the ‘warp and weft’ of every sinew of our lives, It was a blessing of no equal to be cherished for ever.

By the beginning of December, Will, keeping it all well under wraps, invited me for one last lunchtime meal with him at Charlie’s. As we walked in, busy as ever with the familiar aroma of their famous towering, juicy hamburgers that I had sampled so many times before, ‘rock and roll’ played as he drew me past a familiar wall displaying a montage of photographs of so many famous musical icons such as James Dean, The Doors and Elvis.

As we approached a door at the rear of the restaurant, itself covered in posters of pop legends, it burst open to reveal, to my utter amazement, some fifty or so smiling, happy faces, assembled for what was to be the most magnificent leaving party ever. Staff from throughout the Rylander, the Yard, and the Police Department, together with Jane and Laura already in attendance, had come together to wish us farewell. With speeches and presentations intertwined with so much laughter, merriment, music and of course superb mouthwatering food, we were given a fabulous send off.

Will spoke of the extent to which the training program had been taken and that although thankfully the organisation never received a direct threat, he confirmed that a number

of suspects for the arson attacks had earlier been arrested and that Church communities were returning to normal. Relieved to hear this, he confirmed that the programme was to serve as an essential element in reassuring staff and would provide an ongoing safety strategy for the future.

It is often said that “parting is such sweet sorrow” and that was certainly the case that day, as tears of joy filled our eyes.

With the party over, and having said our farewells, I could not prolong the ‘bitter sweet’ feeling any longer as the three of us left and travelled down to Venice, Florida for a short holiday. These were contemplative days as we reflected on our time with Habitat, just like a dream, from which I did not want to wake up as we spoke of our future, our flight back to the UK and our home in Cardiff.

“We’ll keep a Welcome”
When you come Home again to Wales

During our transatlantic crossing, I began to feel the ‘Hiraeth’, that feeling of longing for my homeland that is unique to all Welsh people.

Our conversation, full of what we may find back home, raised such questions as, “what would our house be like, would it be knocked around or damaged?” Our jobs, “would they still be there for us and would we be welcomed back into the fold?” So many doubts were raised yet, despite our worries, they all proved unfounded.

Mr Mishi had proved to be the perfect tenant, leaving our home, spotlessly clean and as though we had never been away.

Our homecoming itself was tremendous, with family and friends making such a fuss about our return. Christmas and New Year was so special, one of great tidings and joy as many tarried with us, enjoying one-another’s company and to ask of our trip. With so much to tell and enthuse over, it was indeed the perfect gift.

January soon came around and it was back to work. Jane, as expected, had a new position with the bank which she enjoyed and for me it I returned to the Benefits Department.

As one would expect after a year of absence there had been many changes to both procedure and legislation, leaving me with much to learn and brush up on but my colleagues all rallied round to offer great help and support.

Within days of being back at my desk, I made a point of speaking with Simon my departmental manager. Telling of my experience I presented him with a large framed publicity poster depicting images of Habitat at work throughout the world. Delighted, he displayed it prominently on the wall of his office for all to see.

Sometime later, I was interviewed by a journalist from the South Wales Echo, an earlier publication of Lord Thomson and one that I had worked on all those years ago. Within days, the article, a full colour page, went to print only to be promptly followed by my being interviewed on a radio programme for BBC Wales. The interest aroused was quite astonishing!

You may wonder why I have chosen to include such brash, self indulgence in my book, but it is for a reason and a positive one at that: -

Out of such exposure came an opportunity to speak to pupils of Mary Immaculate High School, on the western outskirts of Cardiff. With full support of my employers, they allowed me the time to take my message forward. Speaking to children of various academic abilities, some nearing school leaving age, I outlined my experiences and their impact upon me, before going on to talk of how, they,

by volunteering locally, could gain valuable, meaningful experience in order to enhance their CVs and improve their employment prospects.

The talks went well and were even attended by the school chaplain who, after class, spent time with me discussing various aspects of my voluntary work.

Some of the pupils were studying Harper Lee's acclaimed book, 'To Kill a Mockingbird.' A classic of the 1960s, the story, set in racially torn Alabama, tells of hate, indignity, hardship and injustice at a time when 'coloureds' as they were then referred to, had very few human rights.

It was suggested to me that as a way of putting the story into context, I may be able to offer a modern day perspective into aspects of the book, by drawing on more recent comparisons with life in the adjoining state of Georgia. Up for the challenge, I accepted.

After school on the day of my 'talk,' I received a telephone call from one of the teachers telling me of the students' response.

"You have received the highest accolade Jeff, my kids thought you were *wicked*," a term which I later established means 'rather good!'

With my part time offerings at the school complete I was now free to fully commit myself to my regular employment in the Benefits Department. By the New Millennium however, disabled with depression again and on the advice

of my doctor, it became clear that it was time for me to leave the regular workplace.

It was during my regular visits to hospital, and whilst experiencing a slow, but gradual improvement in my mental health, that my doctor began to discuss the notion of taking my 'interest in people' forward and to use my life's experiences and people skills in another way.

A short while later, I applied to the Volunteer Co-ordinator at Whitchurch Hospital, Ms Jill Griffiths, for the post of Volunteer Activities Assistant and Support Worker at one of the hospital's Rehabilitation Units, Ty-Canol. Successful in my quest, I worked in that capacity from 2001 to the latter part of 2009 during which time the Coordinator, Jill, and latterly the unit manager, Mr Danny Buckley provided me with outstanding support.

At first being able to offer little more than to provide patients with tea and coffee, I went on to become fully involved, participating in all activities seeking to both inspire, motivate and comfort those that needed a little ray of sunshine, enjoyment and purpose in their often dark world of mental illness.

In 2007 Jane and I attended a funeral. At the wake I went to the bar to purchase a round of drinks and was served by a young lady in her mid twenties. She said that she felt as though she knew my face, and may have met me before asking if I was a teacher. Convinced that she knew me, she enquired if I ever had ever had cause to visit schools.

Asking where she lived, she responded “Ely, I went to Mary Immaculate School.”

The penny dropped, as I acknowledged that some 10 years ago I visited that very school to talk about volunteering and ‘To Kill a Mocking Bird.’ With the satisfaction written all over her face of having been able to ‘place me’ in her life, she went on to tell of how my talk had made such an impact upon her and her friends and that she was now a Secretarial Assistant and enjoyed her work.

Touched by her sincerity, I congratulated her for her achievement, her amazing memory and for having the confidence to approach me in the way that she did.

With my having so much to savour, and without her perhaps actually realising it, she had shed a little light into what was a very sad, dark day. On our way home Jane and I took stock, happy in the knowledge that some good had come from my days in the classroom all those years ago.

Moving on, my activities at Ty Canol continued unabated with my work now incorporating two afternoons a week at a ‘Drop In’ in the northern suburbs of Cardiff, a centre offering friendship, companionship and meaningful activities in a warm and safe environment, ideal for the vulnerable, given the emphasis now being placed on ‘Care in the Community.’ Prior to Christmas 2009, and feeling the need to ‘stand back; I reluctantly drew my eight years voluntary service to a close.

It was during such time that I was in the company of an old friend, Brian Standring, whilst on holiday in Cyprus. Brian and his lovely wife Gill invited Jane and I for lunch in an old rustic, vine covered, stone Taverna in his ancient village of Akoursos. In the company of another of Brian's guests we got to talk about Habitat and our time in Americus. Brian, having heard of my exploits many times previous, urged me on as I waxed lyrical of our experiences. Expecting to be told to 'shut up, having heard enough, my account aroused considerable interest, with Brian urging me to "put my thoughts together and write a book," adding that... *"If no one else reads it I surely will."*

From Brian's words of inspiration I began to apply my mind to such a venture and put pen to paper, something that I had often considered but somehow never seemed to find the right moment or emotional strength.

The closure of a page

For many months I have laboured painstakingly, mulling over my thoughts and thumbing through my diary, trying to make sense of it all whilst writing my recollections. In doing so, I have joyfully relived every precious moment, my heart beating on times as though I was still there as I unraveled each thread of this colourful tapestry. Now, as it is drawing to a close, I begin to wonder what I will do when my book is complete.

There will I am sure be a number of outlets to which I could channel my energies, perhaps as a volunteer again in Mental Health, who knows? But as each sentence, paragraph and page takes its hold upon me, with the occasional tear clouding my eyes, I keep getting the feeling of being ‘drawn back,’ to Americus, armed with this small yet personal memoir. I see myself walking its streets, sitting on that same balcony of the Windsor Hotel with Jane as we contemplate the families, friends and colleagues that we once worked alongside. Certainly, to visit the Rylander and to locate and talk with Dulcie Willis and old Ronald, who as it happens, did get a “roof that didn’t leak and windows he could open in the heat of the sun,” these desires are all there before me and within reach.

The pinnacle however, would be to team up again with Habitat for Humanity, and attend Devotions, to touch base with where it all started. To savour those warm loving

moments of inspirational praise and worship whilst ‘giving thanks’ to the Lord, who without His intervention and grace none of this would have been possible. Perhaps I may even find the opportunity to continue to talk passionately again with others who may wish to listen and be interested to hear of that old piece of paper that I saw, gathering dust on the dash board of my truck during my first nervous morning at the Yard,

“Building Houses, Building Lives.”

It really does Say It all!

Post Script

With so much water having passed under the bridge since those dark days since leaving the Humberside Police, much of which is incorporated into this little book, I now feel that I have experienced my own personal renaissance.

With those to thank who both directly and indirectly, helped in so many ways to lift the gloom and transform my life and at the same time, enrich Jane's, we shall be eternally grateful.

Yes, I still have to face those depressive days, the revolving door of "Diamonds and Stones," but more content now, having been enriched by a...

'Lifetime of experience crammed into just one chapter.'

Having come 'face to face' with those who had suffered the indignity and scourge, of poverty, bigotry, hatred and discrimination, I also recall the glory of sincerity, generosity and friendship shown by so many, often those , who, in the face of adversity, rose to towering heights as I sat in awe of their character.

These are the ***real people*** in life, those that I can only humbly look up to as ***'Icons of Humanity.'***

Now, enriched by their indelible presence in my life, I bring this story to a close.

Just as I began with a poem, I intend to finish it in similar style but not before quoting words of Aldous Huxley...

“Experience isn't what happens to a man:-

It is what a man does with what happens to him.”

Aldous Huxley

A Poem
A New Beginning

*Walking without purpose through the wilderness of life,
propped up with medication, supported by my wife.
Sometimes going forward then just falling back
a life without direction, barely on the track.*

*Then as one door was closing, another opened just ajar,
a vision of a new life starting from afar.
The dream it was unfolding of others in great need,
then off to South West Georgia, they wished us both God
speed.*

*Our mission it was uncertain, yet with purpose we did fly,
to help those less fortunate, across the great divide!
The home of Dulcie Willis, just a run down shack,
too see such heartfelt poverty we could never turn our back.*

*Up in the early morning, at Devotions we would pray, for a
better life for those in need,
helped by our hands, our words, our deeds.*

*Houses that we built out there, with the family at our side,
but this was not just building homes we were also building
lives.*

*For those in desperation and the lives of others too,
the lives of those there building, the lives of me and you.*

*'Then as the year drew to a close, twa's to the east we
looked,
back over the Atlantic, the closure of a book.
No, not a closure really, just a chapter and a page
that I would keep on writing, my feet back on the stage.*

*Not feeling one year older, not feeling like before,
my life had changed completely since walking through that
door.*

*I found that long lost energy, the vigour that bodily fire,
to live a life with purpose was now my one desire.*

*This goal did not come easy; I needed wind within my sails,
then another door it opened at a hospital in Wales.
Working as a volunteer with friends so kind and true,
I found another lease of life, like starting over anew.*

*My work it was in re-hab helping those to find a way, of
putting back the sunlight into the darkness of their day.*

And so as I reflect upon the contours of my life,

I think of

Dulcie Willis, Devotions and Jane my Wife.

Acknowledgements

My first debt of gratitude goes to my loving wife Jane, who simply by being there throughout, solid and dependable whilst often facing her own personal challenges demonstrated that unique strength of character and unending qualities that make her so special.

Then there is of course Brian Standring, who so often listened to various aspects of my story over a glass of wine and urged me to “put it into print.”

In fact, every character named in this book has all, in various ways played their part. Some, only briefly making an appearance, whilst others dominating the page with their huge, powerful presence.

All of these people, just like the pieces of a jigsaw, have helped to paint this ‘picture of life’ now embodied into words.

And finally, to my good and long time friend Damian Clarke, who with his remarkable patience and unquestionable editing skills, helped me make sense of my initial ramblings and put this story together.

“Thank you.”

The Author

Jeff Barley was born in Cardiff in 1949. He attended Llanrumney Secondary Modern School leaving at age 15 and later studied Criminology at the University College Cardiff.

As a Police Officer, he served in the South Wales, Gwent and Humberside Constabularies during which time he served as Staff Officer to Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary whilst seconded to the Directing Staff of the Police Staff College, Bramshill.

During his relatively short yet distinguished police career from 1969 to 1990, Jeff received a number of commendations the most notable being the 'Queen's Commendation for Bravery.'

Throughout the major part of 1996, Jeff and his wife Jane committed themselves to Voluntary service with Habitat for Humanity International with Jeff later working as a volunteer with the NHS from 2001 to 2009.

He is currently a voluntary committee member of the Cardiff branch of NARPO, The National Association of Retired Police Officers.

For the record, Jeff and Jane have been back to Americus on two occasions since their Voluntary Service and have met up with many of the characters that are central to his story, all of whom were doing well and are still living in their Habitat homes.

Importantly, Jeff had his wish and along with Jane attended 'Devotions' at the Rylander Building in April 2013.

In November of that same year, Jeff was discharged from outpatient care at Whitchurch Hospital where he had been a patient for 23 years and is now living life to the full again, depression free, at last!

Damien Clarke.



Jeff and Jane in the garden of Amistad



Friendship, Amistad.