Final Essay

As I walked down Goodwin Street the normal hustle and bustle of our University’s campus was gone; the campus was completely dead. It was eight o’clock in the morning on Saturday, September 13, and I was making my way to Habitat for Humanity’s groundbreaking ceremony.

Habitat for Humanity is a worldwide Christian organization that works to rid the world of substandard housing and homelessness. One of Habitat for Humanity’s main jobs is to rebuild or repair homes so that low income families living in poor quality homes can move into decent, affordable homes. They are also working to provide lifelong solutions to these problems so that in the future both substandard housing and homelessness will be seen as completely unacceptable (“Statement” 1). On September 13, presentations given by the president of Habitat for Humanity and the project coordinator of Habitat for Humanity marked the beginning of the groundbreaking ceremony. Board members, volunteers, the family receiving the home this spring and members from the community were there to watch as Habitat for Humanity broke ground at 708 North Goodwin Street. This marked the beginning of the ninth home that the Habitat for Humanity chapter at the University of Illinois is building.

After a long walk, I finally reached 708 Goodwin Street, just past University. As I approached the lot, I was reassured that our campus was not completely dead that morning. I walked up to the lot and there were many things going on in front of me. Before I could advance any further, I took a step back and took in everything that was happening on the lot before me.
The lot was covered in complete mud; there was no grass to walk on whatsoever. However, a majority of the lot’s ground was already unable to be walked on due to the large amounts of materials lying around. A port-a-potty, multiple stacks of different sized wood, a red truck with supplies in the bed, as well as a small trailer home full of supplies all filled the small lot. There were also tool boxes and power tools lying around the lot; and, about twenty feet back from the sidewalk, behind all of the mess of supplies and power tools, lay the base of the home.

The homes that Habitat for Humanity builds come from money that each individual chapter of Habitat for Humanity raises. Each chapter can obtain their money in different ways. They can apply for grants, they can pair up with businesses and receive donations from them, and they can do fundraising events. Whatever way they choose to obtain their money to build their home, each chapter has to come up with seventy thousand dollars or they will not be able to build until they do. This money is then given to the county affiliate and put into what they call a build account, and the county affiliate is then responsible for paying the contractors and purchasing all of the necessary supplies to build the home (Bardell 6).

To raise money, our chapter at the University of Illinois does a lot of different fundraising events. Every other Tuesday our chapter hosts a general meeting where the board members discuss upcoming events and issues and get to know the volunteers. Their general meetings are open to anyone who wants to come and has interest in volunteering with them. There are usually about ten board members at the meetings. All of the board members usually sit in the first row of seats and you can pick them out from the regular volunteers because they wear light blue and dark blue Habitat for Humanity t-shirts. The vice president of Habitat for Humanity usually begins the meetings by discussing the upcoming events. The vice president is a senior; he is a little taller than the average guy, has bright red hair, speaks softly, and seems a little uncomfortable when he has to
talk in front of everyone. Throughout their meetings, the vice president talked about many of their different fundraising events that they do to earn money towards their house. Through fundraising they aim to earn 25,000 dollars this year. Every year Habitat for Humanity has special events that they use participation in to earn money, such as the volleyball tournament and the 5k race. During the meeting, the vice president showed pictures of Habitat for Humanity board members and volunteers that participated in the volleyball tournament. He showed a lot of funny action shots and the board members made jokes about the pictures and how they never make it very far in the tournament. Other fundraising events that he talked about included canning and trick or treat for change. Two times a year volunteers sign up and stand outside of Wal-Mart to collect canned goods. Trick or treat for change is a new fundraising event that they did this year. Volunteers and board members dressed up in costumes and then went from door to door in the Champaign area asking for spare change. To persuade the volunteers even more, he made sure to inform us that there was a high possibility that we would receive candy for ourselves along with the spare change.

Besides informing us on any upcoming events, the general meetings also went over different relevant issues. Different board members have gone over topics, such as Habitat for Humanity’s role in disaster relief, celebrity’s help in Habitat for Humanity, and updates on the house. During one meeting, the secretary went over the progress of the house being built on Goodwin Street. The secretary is a graduate student who is on the short side, has short blonde hair, and is a lot louder and seems more comfortable talking in front of everyone than the vice president does. As he goes over what has been accomplished at the build site he shows pictures of volunteers and board members working on the house. There are a lot of funny and embarrassing pictures of the board members that they put in to get a good laugh from everyone. The board
members also use the meetings to try and get to know the volunteers and potential board members better. Two girls who are a part of the education and advocacy board set up a game of Pictionary for everyone at one of the meetings. These girls set up the game so that you had to draw a challenge stick along with the word you were drawing a picture of. The challenges included drawing with your non-dominant hand, drawing blindfolded, and drawing with “super chalk”, which was a very long stick with a piece of chalk attached to the end. Both the volunteers and board members got pretty into the game. There was a group who called themselves the purple people eaters, and there was one group that the other three groups picked on because they only ever had negative points. The board members are able to make general meetings not as dull as they could potentially be even though they have to cover some general information about building at their meetings.

It was the ground breaking ceremony, the first day of building, and the Habitat for Humanity members were already hard at work. There were about twenty people working at the ground breaking ceremony. About half of the people there were board members while the other half was volunteers. Everyone working was wearing jeans, tennis shoes or work boots, and a t-shirt. Also, they all had safety goggles on or had them with them. The build day began at 8 a.m. and I arrived around 8:45 a.m., and a lot of the workers were already sweating badly or covered in mud. By the time I arrived, the base of the home had already been made; there was a rectangular hole in the ground surrounded by a perimeter of bricks. There were about four layers of stacked bricks making up the entire base of the house. In front of the rectangular base, there was about a four by fifteen feet base of stacked bricks attached, which will be their porch. Behind the base of the home there was a huge pile of dirt, which was dug out to create the hole for the base of the home. The majority of the work was occurring inside the base of the home.
There were about five individuals who were surrounding the inside of the base with Styrofoam for insulation. There was a large pile of small rocks that they used to fill up buckets and pour into the base. One of the board members who is a girl was shoveling rocks into two different buckets. She is an extremely small, thin girl. Two boys were then carrying the buckets filled with rocks to the base of the home and pouring them in. After I was there for an hour, I could see a size difference in the large pile of rocks. Then there were around three volunteers with large rakes who were spreading the rocks around the bottom of the base. About five of the volunteers were working on placing a layer of gold shield around the top layer of the brick and then laying down a wood base on the top. There was an older man who was carrying around a rolled up sheet of paper. He is short with dark brown hair and was wearing a gray polo, and he was helping instruct these workers on getting the copper shield and wood surrounding the home; he is the construction manager. For the most part everyone seemed to know what they were doing. Everyone was assigned their own task that needed to be done and they were working on that. There was not a huge need for the construction manager to be walking around telling all of the volunteers what they needed to be doing at all times. They would all work on their job and when they were finished they would move on to another job that someone else needed help finishing. There was very little down time between each of their tasks. They were usually always at work. They planned on having the entire wood base floor in the bottom of the base by the end of the day.

Everyone was working very hard and very quickly. I spent an hour at the first build day and there had been a lot of progress made in the hour before I arrived and I could see even more progress made by the time I left. The atmosphere is very positive. No one complained about the wind and bad weather or about the long day ahead of them. They had a radio playing loud music, and while they were working they got excited when good songs came on and they sang along.
There was a lot of excitement when REO Speed Wagon came on the radio station. Even though everyone is doing a lot of hard work, they are all still happy. They are all very encouraging and supportive as well. Two of the group members had to carry a very heavy object, and when they were finished moving it everyone else gave them a cheer. They also all work together very well. For each task that they are working on, there are at least two people working on it together. Each task was assigned to a number of different volunteers and they worked together to complete it. To fill the base of the home with rocks they have the smaller, weaker girl fill the buckets with rocks while the two males carry the heavy buckets back and forth. The members of Habitat for Humanity have created a very good environment to build a home at 708 Goodwin Street.

The homes that Habitat for Humanity builds are described as “simple, decent, and affordable” (“What” 1). Each home is made as simple as possible to maintain cheap prices, however, they are built large enough to fit the needs of the family that they are building the home for. The homes can vary slightly to accommodate the needs of each individual family but they are generally very similar. There are trained individuals instructing the work done at build sites to ensure that decent homes are built correctly with good quality materials. Habitat for Humanity homes are made affordable because they are built by volunteers, they are kept simple, and the home recipients pay a no-profit loan on their home, which means that the family only has to pay what was spent on their home and do not have to worry about paying for interest. Habitat for Humanity makes it possible for families with low incomes to purchase these simple, decent, and affordable homes (“What” 1).

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 defines the homeless as “those lacking regular, adequate nighttime residence, those who only have temporary living accommodations or primary nighttime residence in shelters, hotels, or private or public places not
intended for a human being’s residency” (McManus 2). Homelessness has been a problem in the American culture for the past four hundred years. In the 1820s, the problem of homelessness began to increase due to urbanization and industrialization. By the mid nineteenth century there was such a problem with homelessness that there was a need to take action to begin helping with the problem and by the end of the century homelessness became a serious problem within the American society. There has been a decrease in the amount of cheap homes and housing assistance programs, which have led to the increase in homelessness and Americans living in substandard homes (McManus 3). According to the United Nations, there are about 1.6 billion people living in substandard housing and 100 million homeless individuals in the world today; and, there are ninety-five million people living in the United States who have housing problems (“Why” 1). To put an end to substandard housing and homelessness, everyone must realize what a large problem this currently is, and then work to put an end to this problem (McManus 5).

The neighborhood that 708 Goodwin Street is a part of is a very pleasant neighborhood. It contains many other decent sized homes. A majority of them are ranch homes with probably two to three bedrooms. There are also smaller bi-leveled homes, which are probably no larger than 2,000 square feet. All of the homes in the neighborhood have front and backyards, which are not very large, but they are just big enough for a nice garden and children or dogs to run around. The lot that Habitat for Humanity is building on is about the same size as all of the lots in the area. When the home I finished it is going to be 1,200 square feet with three bedrooms (Bardell 6). The Habitat home is going to fit in perfectly with this neighborhood and will also have a fairly small front and backyard. Behind the base of the home they have a pretty backyard. They have multiple tall ash trees and it is very green. The neighbors across the street from the lot have three little children playing outside in the front yard with their dog and bicycles.
On October 4, Habitat for Humanity was at 708 Goodwin Street working on the house for the fourth Saturday in a row. The neighborhood was very peaceful and quite that morning. Besides the sound of pounding, drilling, and sawing, the only commotion in the neighborhood came from the occasional car or bus that drove by and occasionally the neighbors’ dogs would bark probably because of the loud noises coming from the build site. The neighbor’s little daughter was also outside playing with her bike again this morning. Besides a girl who was out running, she was the only person I saw out yet that morning.

This year our chapter of Habitat for Humanity is building a home for Sonya and Bryce Brownlee. Sonya is a twenty-five year old single mother and Bryce is her three year old son. Sonya is from the Urbana area; she attended Urbana High School and went to Parkland Community College. Although Sonya has a full time job, with the current problems in the housing industry she was not able to afford to move out of their old home on her own. Sonya heard about Habitat for Humanity from a Habitat home owner, who told Sonya about all of the fun she had working with the volunteers to build her home. Therefore, Sonya applied for a Habitat home so that she and Bryce could move out of their old neighborhood. Their neighborhood was a very bad place for anyone to be living and especially for someone to be trying to raise a child. There was a lot of “vandalism, reckless driving, drug abuse, and even violent deaths” (“About” 1). Sonya also did not like the fact that Bryce did not have a yard to play in. She has been worn out over the years trying to protect her son from the detrimental environment that he has been living in, and is ready to move on with her life. Sonya said “I’m truly grateful for the opportunity to become a homeowner! It has always been my desire to have my home built but it’s even a greater feeling to soon be able to say that I helped build my own home” (1)!
Habitat for Humanity is helping families by removing them from the unsafe, bad neighborhoods and below average housing that they currently live in, and building simple, decent, and affordable homes for these families. However, what Habitat for Humanity is doing goes even beyond building homes for families in need and trying to put an end to substandard housing. For survival all human beings really need are food, shelter, and clothing. However, in our society today having only these basic necessities has become unacceptable. It would be perfectly reasonable for Habitat for Humanity to build basic shelters for large numbers of individuals to rid the world of homelessness; however, this is not their goal. They are attempting to rid the world of substandard housing as well. Habitat for Humanity removes families from substandard housing so that they will then be more accepted in society. With the help from Habitat for Humanity, they hope that after they have paved the way for families to be accepted within their communities, Habitat for Humanity is working to help turn these families into independent, successful members of society so they will be able to live on their own and fit in with the expectations of our society today. By doing this Habitat for Humanity is not only building a home for these individuals but also working to build up their lives. They are beginning to create the basis for new lives for these families, beginning with helping them afford a home that is viewed as more acceptable in our society today.

By building homes for individuals who are living lives, which are not considered comfortable and socially acceptable, Habitat for Humanity is attempting to create situations that will cause these families to want to become active members of a society where they can be accepted so they can give back to the community. Habitat for Humanity helps these individuals gain new experiences that will aid them in becoming an accepted member of society. For a family to be able to receive a Habitat home they must comply with doing two hundred and fifty sweat
equity hours of work for their home. These two hundred and fifty hours can be obtained by the
house recipients doing volunteer work with Habitat, such as going to build days or fundraising
events or by going to meetings for the home count towards their hours of work as well. By having
it be mandatory that the families do these sweat equity hours, it requires them to do some form of
work to receive their home. Habitat for Humanity makes it so that they do not just give this home
to the family; they are required to put in a lot of time and work to receive it.

Habitat for Humanity is also setting the family up to make positive relationships with
encouraging individuals by requiring them to obtain many Habitat meetings and events. The
families are required to spend time with the Habitat members and volunteers that are taking the
time to build their homes, and a goal of Habitat for Humanity is to create a close tie between the
house recipients and their members. The president of Habitat for Humanity, Marli Bardell,
believes that they are going to get very close with the Brownlees this year because they are all so
close in age and their home is very close to campus. They are really trying to make that tie between
the volunteers and home owners closer. In the fall they do a rake day where they go around and
rake the yards of the Habitat home owners and see how they are doing (Bardell 4). Habitat for
Humanity is attempting to create new relationships in these individuals’ lives which will turn their
lives in the right direction and give them the drive to become successful on their own. Once the
families are more accepted and confident within their communities they will be more likely to want
to have an active role within society and they will hopefully strive to be able to contribute by
themselves. They hope that from the relationships they have formed and work they have done and
seen through Habitat for Humanity that they will have some inspiration to work to obtain a better
life for themselves and their family.
The lot was not as messy as it was on the first day of building. The ground was covered in little rocks and dirt surrounded the perimeter of the base as opposed to complete mud everywhere. Habitat for Humanity made a lot of progress on the home since the first build day. The house had all the walls up, the floor was in, the blue boarding was put up on the walls, the porch had its cement top filled, about half of the doors and windows were installed, and they were working on finishing the roof.

There were four people working on finishing the roof. Together they were all trying to set the base pieces of wood on top of the wood framing of the roof. The construction manager climbed up a ladder and questioned the four guys working together on the roof to make sure they did their jobs correctly. After the construction manager spoke to them, I could hear one of the guys up on the roof say “it’s okay Eric, just do your best!” There were also guys working on cutting pieces of wood for the roof. The smaller girl board member would stand on the piece of wood while one of the guys cut the other end with a saw. There were also four other guys working on installing two windows in the front of the home.

Everyone who was working wore a hard hat. A lot of the guys wore hot pink hard hats, and everyone who worked with the wood cutting machine had on some sort of protective eye wear. The lot was very loud that morning from all of the use of power tools and hammering nails into the roof. As I walked to the back of the lot I could hear a volunteer yelling: “are you all having as much fun as I am!?” When I got to the back of the lot, I learned that this is where all of the mess had gone. There was a large pile of spare scraps from cut wood and the blue boarding. It appeared like they had started to work on the landscaping because there were mounds of dirt, pulled weeds, and cut down branches lying everywhere. Habitat for Humanity plans to be done with all of the building for the semester by October 25. After they are done, the subcontractors
come and do heating, air conditioning, plumbing, electrical, insulation, and dry walling during the winter. Next spring Habitat for Humanity will begin working on the house again. They will have to do painting, installing the flooring and cabinets, and landscaping. They will then be done building the home and the Brownlees will receive their home at the dedication ceremony.

Marli Bardell has been a member of Habitat for Humanity at the University of Illinois for the past four years and she said that “it has probably been the best thing I have done on campus” (Bardell 3). She joined Habitat for Humanity because she found it very satisfying that there were tangible results that you can see at the end of year after getting involved with Habitat (1). She believes “most people are just looking for a way to give back and again people like it because it’s hands on and they actually get to go out and be a part of something that’s going to affect someone’s life” (2).

Habitat for Humanity’s goal of working to better other people’s lives really pulls in individuals who are looking to give a lending hand, and according to Marli the dedication ceremony at the end of the year makes the entire process worthwhile. Once Habitat for Humanity has completed building the home, they have a dedication ceremony where the family receives their home. After all of the hard work put into the house, this is a very emotional time for the volunteers as well as the family who is receiving their new home. The relationships created through the building process and the results of getting closer and closer to Habitat for Humanity’s overall goal after building each home is definitely worth the work for Habitat for Humanity members (4).

Works Cited

“About the Brownlees.” Champaign County Habitat for Humanity and Restore. Habitat for Humanity. 2008. 16 Nov

Meagan Reitz  
Rhetoric 105  
12-2-08  
John Griswold

**Self-reflective Essay**

If I had to choose one word to describe the way I felt about my semester as an ethnographer, I would use the word uncertain. From the beginning of the project up until this very moment, I have been very unsure if I have been doing all of my assignments and work correctly. The problem for me was never taking the time to work on the project and assignments, but it was trying to complete the tasks as they were intended to be completed.

At the beginning of the semester, I got started on the project right away. Once I decided I wanted to work with Habitat for Humanity, I instantly went to our University’s Habitat for...
Humanity website and started looking around. From the website I found the email address of Habitat for Humanity’s president and I emailed her right away and set up my next field working day. I spent my second day of field work with Habitat for Humanity at their first day of building, their ground breaking ceremony. This is when I began to question whether I was doing what I was supposed to or not. I felt very out of place at the build site. All of the volunteers and board members were hard at work and I was just off to the side walking around taking note of everything I saw around me. At one point a board member walked up to me and offered me a shovel so I could help with some of the work. I was completely unsure of what I was supposed to do. From class I got the impression that I was only supposed to be taking notes and not actually helping to build the home, but I felt so awkward when everyone else was working and even more awkward when this man who has no idea why I was there was trying to offer me a shovel so I could work on the house.

By my fourth time at my field site I really began to worry about whether I was doing my job at my field site correctly. I had previously spent time with Habitat for Humanity at two of their general meetings and also their ground breaking ceremony. The fourth time I was with them was at their fourth build day and I did exactly what I did at their first one. I walked around the lot and took note of everything they did and everything I saw. However, once again I felt very awkward and in the notes I took I wrote: “I don’t feel like I’m doing my work right because I’m not able to really get to know anyone because whenever I’m with my group it’s either with a huge group of volunteers at their meetings or I’m at their build site and they’re all at work…hopefully me viewing them is good enough.” I was beginning to feel very nervous because it was the fourth time I had spent with my group and I still did not feel as if I was getting to know anything about them. I was doing what was required of us and going to my field site every week for at least an
hour, however, I was still so unsure and I did not feel like I was doing what was actually required of us.

I also spent my weekly field work time with Habitat for Humanity by going to their general meetings every other Tuesday. Unfortunately, I felt even less engaged with my subculture at these meetings than I did at the build days. It was a different feeling though. As opposed to feeling awkward and out of place I usually just felt completely bored and uninterested in the meeting’s topics. They began every meeting by giving a presentation on their events and then usually had another board member give a presentation on something related to Habitat for Humanity. However, I continued going to their meetings and writing down the things they talked about in their presentations, what the volunteers around me were doing, and anything else that happened at their meetings, but I just could not become interested in what was going on around me and I still felt as if I was getting nothing out of this. Within most of the notes I took at their general meetings they ended in comments such as, “Yes!” or “We’re finally done!” On top of all of that I still did not feel like I was getting a better understanding of the culture of my group by going to these meetings either. I did not know what else to do. I was writing everything that happened around me but I could not understand how I was supposed to learn about this group’s culture by just listening to them giving PowerPoint presentations.

After two more general meetings and an interview, it was time for the analysis paper and for us to discuss the so what of all of the work we had done so far in the semester. No matter how unsure I was about what I was doing, the analysis paper had to be done. I began working on the paper and trying to dig deeper and see things from all of the notes I had taken while I was with Habitat for Humanity, but I just could not see it. After sitting in front of my computer for hours, I was able to get out three pages which discussed the realities to the misconceptions about Habitat
for Humanity. I brought this to office hours to try and see what else I could add to it and found that I was working in completely the wrong direction. I talked for about an hour with John about what I had seen and done this semester and tried to dig and see what lied underneath everything that I was seeing. I struggled for that hour. Even after talking with him I could still not see it, it did not come to me. After I left I had a better understanding of what I could write because he was able to see things that I could not. I was so frustrated and upset that I had been spending so much time with this group of people but still did not see or feel anything.

As I tried to begin writing the analysis paper it was extremely difficult for me to represent these people’s lives. I still had yet to find anything that I thought represented the culture of this group. Through my interview I got to sit down and talk with the president of Habitat for Humanity, however, this was the only real sit down talk that I had with anyone from Habitat for Humanity. It was really hard for me to try and discuss and represent these people’s lives when I still felt that I did not know them. I had seen them interacting at work at the build days and I had seen them interact and give presentations at their general meetings, but I did not feel like I could accurately represent them without personally getting to know each and every one of them. I had gotten to know the president better through talking with her at my interview but I did not think it was right for me to assume things about the entire group after only learning more in depth about her as a person. It was a hard and frustrating process for me to try and analyze this group of people from only having looked at and observed them.

Overall, this semester has been very frustrating for me. After being so uncertain of what I am doing at my field site, it makes it very difficult to be certain of what I am doing when it comes time for the writing assignments. I spent a lot of time staring at a blank screen on my computer wondering what it was I was supposed to be writing before I could even begin writing anything.
Once I finally was completed with our writing assignments, I generally felt pretty content with them. However, this was probably because I spent such a large amount of time working on them trying to get them remotely close to what was expected of us. I believe if I was more certain that I was completing my tasks at my field site correctly and actually doing what I was supposed to be doing, then I would have felt more confident about my writing process because I would have known that I was actually working with good material and information. If I could do the whole process over again, I would somehow find a way to dig deeper into their subculture. I could possibly go to a larger variety of their events, but I would just try and do anything so that I could feel as if I really go to know this group. Unfortunately, from this semester I did not feel as if I was really able to learn and represent the culture of Habitat for Humanity. I have spent this semester as a very uncertain, frustrated ethnographer.