

Sunday, May 3, 2026

THIS IS WHAT IT TAKES TO TELL CHICAGO THE TRUTH



To keep you informed, it takes hours of requesting records, chasing leads, and—at times—putting ourselves in difficult and uncertain situations to be where the story is.

On **World Press Freedom Day**, we're reminded that this kind of journalism doesn't happen by accident. It's made possible by people who believe Chicago deserves the truth—no matter how hard it is to uncover.

A HOME OF HER OWN

Austin resident builds first home with the help of a partnership between Habitat for Humanity and By the Hand Club for Kids

BY ELLEIANA GREEN
For the Sun-Times

Courtney B. has only ever called Chicago's Austin neighborhood home. But as housing costs rose and her options began to shrink, she feared being priced out.

For the past eight years, Courtney rented a third-floor apartment, where long trips up the stairs and limited space often made it difficult to host family.

"I've always said, 'I want a house. I want a house. I want a house,'" Courtney said. "But I didn't know where this house was going to be. I didn't know how this house was going to look."

Now, with the help of Habitat for Humanity Chicago, the 45-year-old is helping build the first home she'll ever own.

"I believe I've spoken this home into existence, because now I'll have my own home," she said.

On Saturday morning, she joined volunteers from Habitat Chicago and members of By the Hand Club for Kids, an after-school program serving children across Chicago, to paint the walls of the home she is still working to finish.

In late June, she will move into her forever home — an 1,800-square-foot, four-bedroom, two-bathroom house with a fenced-in backyard and detached two-car garage. The homes were designed with a first-floor bedroom and bathroom, no-step entry and Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant hallways and doorways for residents to be able to age in place.

One of three identical single-family Habitat Chicago homes on the site, Courtney's neighbors will be two other first-time female homeowners.

"Is this really happening? Am I



Courtney B., a future homeowner of a Habitat for Humanity House, said Saturday, "I believe I've spoken this home into existence, because now I'll have my own home." PAT NABONG/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

really going to have my own house?" Courtney said in excitement as she stood inside one of the homes painting drywall.

The land where the three homes stand — once a vacant plot of land in the backyard of By the Hand Club for Kids' Austin location — was purchased by the after-school program from the Cook County Land Bank in November 2024.

While the By the Hand Club primarily serves children living in under-resourced neighborhoods, it also works with parents as part of a broader effort to support families. Leaders said housing affordability has become a growing concern among parents, prompting a partnership with Habitat Chicago to develop homes on the donated land.

Courtney, a parent of a former By the Hand student, responded to the organization's outreach after attending its financial literacy workshops. Staff then helped her apply for the home-ownership program and have supported her throughout the process.

Last summer, Habitat Chicago officially broke ground on the site.



Volunteer Jonathan Festherson paints a house near North Lockwood Avenue and North Laramie Avenue in Austin on Saturday.



Volunteer Yolanda Perry paints the inside of a house. Habitat for Humanity Chicago and the Cook County Land Bank Authority, in partnership with By The Hand Club, are building three single-family homes in Austin that will be owned by Austin residents.

"The collaboration with Habitat for Humanity Chicago really helps us to reach a demographic that we couldn't reach naturally, and essentially go into developing homes for families," said Billy Ayuko, 38, the senior vice president of programming for By the Hand.

Habitat Chicago sells homes like

a traditional developer but provides zero-interest loans to buyers. The organization focuses on expanding access to home ownership for people historically excluded from it, including women and minority families.

The Austin project is Habitat Chicago's first build in the neigh-



Volunteer Kathy Palumbo paints a house Saturday in Austin.

borhood, part of an effort "to keep Austin residents in Austin," said Rachel Hardy, 43, the senior marketing and communications manager for Habitat Chicago.

After the property's ribbon-cutting ceremony in June, Courtney plans to move into the home with her son and nephews. She said she's looking forward to starting over fresh and hopes the space will be a new gathering spot for her family.

"This is mine, and nobody can take it," she said. "My position in Austin is pretty much solidified. I don't plan on going anywhere."