

Habitat's work as a passion and a lifestyle

Mari-Jon Adams, better known as MJ, left an everlasting mark on Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity, as well as on the hearts of those who worked beside her. For many, her role as the first Executive Director marked the growth and transformation of Pioneer Valley Habitat into the organization that it has become today. She “upped the game” of the organization by improving operations and giving it a cohesive business model. From there, Pioneer Valley Habitat went from building one house every two years or so, to consistently building multiple homes a year. MJ was a natural-born leader, and quickly became the glue of the organization, a foundational piece that everyone could rely on.



“I don't recall anybody I ever encountered in Habitat who was not the salt of the earth, who will give you the shirt off their back, who were so much so committed to the work.”

A fourth generation Northampton resident, MJ's family has strong community ties to the region. She went to college at UMass Amherst and after some years of venturing elsewhere in Massachusetts, she eventually made her way back to Northampton. She was able to buy a house from an old friend and was able to raise her daughters in the town that she was from, which had always been her dream.

Before Habitat, she worked as the economic development planner for the region. As a longtime resident, she felt that some of the statements that were made in the State of the Region didn't give a holistic view of the difficulties that some individuals dealt with on a daily basis in the Pioneer Valley, especially those who were in lower income brackets looking to become homeowners. So, when the Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity job opened up, MJ decided it was time to realign her efforts with something that was closer to her heart and passions. She says, at the time, “working at Habitat wasn't a job, it was a lifestyle, and a very rewarding one at that.” She explained that when you worked for Habitat you learned everything: you were a social service agency, a bank, a construction company, a developer, a volunteer coordinator, community organizer, and an educator, and that's what makes Pioneer Valley Habitat so unique and powerful.

Despite being a transformative member of Habitat at the time, MJ gives a lot of credit to those who were in leadership positions before she had joined the organization. She describes these individuals as, “an extraordinary set of leaders who were heaven-bent on making a difference in the world.” For the 12 years MJ Adams remained the Executive Director, she saw the exponential growth of Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity, and the difference that was made in her community. Through it all, she says that nothing was more moving than the home dedications: once the building was done, the sweat equity was finished, being able to see volunteers blessing the home and handing it over to family was her favorite part.