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Executive Profile

Passion for affordable housing is central to Waukesha Habitat CEO Melissa Songco

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Melissa Songco caught what she called "Habititus" back in college when she began working for Habitat for Humanity as part of Marquette University's collegiate chapter.

She volunteered on the build site, rehabbing homes in Milwaukee County. Then in the summer between her sophomore and junior year, Songco and a friend raised money to go on a global village trip with Habitat for Humanity International to Zambia in Africa. There she built two homes and came back with an immense love for both the nonprofit organization and the mission to create affordable housing globally.

Her love of Habitat for Humanity prompted an undergraduate degree in social work followed by a master's degree in urban studies and nonprofit management. She then joined Milwaukee Habitat for Humanity as development director.



KENNY YOO/MBJ

Melissa Songco..."Ultimately by 2033, we want to be building 20 homes a year, doing 30 repairs a year in three communities."

Songco expanded her leadership reach one year ago when she became the CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Waukesha County. Songco manages a staff of about 20 employees, which includes the organization's ReStore.

"We are on the smaller side, but we're definitely growing," she said. "I think what I've come to conclude about working in Waukesha County and the needs here is the community is very supportive, especially the city of Waukesha.

"It just seems like a general understanding between the business community, the nonprofit community, the local government, the workforce housing that affordable housing is absolutely essential to a vibrant community, and we are the only organization building new affordable homes for home ownership in the county and one of few doing repair or rehab of existing owner occupants."

Warren Widicus, Habitat for Humanity of Waukesha County's board president, said once the search committee discovered Songco, it was a very easy choice. Widicus has been on the board for two years and has volunteered with Habitat for over seven years, working on 20 houses so far.

"She fit all the criteria we were looking for," Widicus said. "She had experience with Habitat. She also has a degree in urban studies, which we were not expecting. It was great to find somebody who has experience in developing urban communities. She had the personality that we were looking for. She just came across as a mature leader that would really do well for our affiliate."

Widicus was particularly impressed with Songco's ability over the last year to begin working on three duplexes in Waukesha County that would become six total homes. When Songco started with the organization, that was just an idea and an empty piece of land.

"To be able to bring that all to fruition and work with the city, work with the county, work with DNR, work with all the different agencies involved and get everybody aligned and everybody rooting for it is really quite an accomplishment," Widicus said.

The three duplexes are located in a Waukesha pocket neighborhood called Prairieville Village, which is a private cul-de-sac near downtown Waukesha.

"That's one way here in Waukesha County we're able to help keep more homes affordable is by having duplex homes, so people still

get that full single-family experience, but some of those shared costs make it more affordable," Songco said.

The goal this year is to build four of the units though Songco said if timelines cooperate, the organization could tackle the third building and do all six units.

She also has ambitious goals for the future. Before the pandemic, Habitat for Humanity of Waukesha County built three to four homes a year. During the pandemic, that number fell to just one home annually.

"My goal over the next year is to grow to six homes a year. Ultimately by 2033, we want to be building 20 homes a year, doing 30 repairs a year in three communities," she said.

Songco added that she wants to build the organization's financial stability as well as its expertise, meaning keeping and retaining talent on the staff.

"My goal for the organization is to really dig in with our employees with training and onboarding, so we can get back to business as usual and hopefully not have to worry about that pandemic as much," she said.

Name: Melissa Songco

Title: CEO

Organization: Habitat for Humanity of Waukesha County

Education: Marquette University, Social Welfare & Justice (Undergrad), University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, Urban Studies & Nonprofit Management (Masters)

Family: Dr. David Songco works for Medical College of Wisconsin, daughters Daphne (6) and Ruby (3)

Hometown: Davenport, IA

Resides: Milwaukee

Age: 38

Hobbies: Running, cycling, cross-country skiing, traveling

Currently reading: "Atlas of the Heart" by Brene Brown

Favorite place in the Milwaukee area: Lapham Peak

Margaret Naczek

Reporter

Milwaukee Business Journal



