

Habitat for Humanity is deeply saddened by death of Millard Fuller

February 3, 2009. Habitat for Humanity is deeply saddened by the death of Millard Fuller, the visionary whose ideas and tireless work created Habitat for Humanity.

Mr. Fuller led Habitat from its founding in 1976 until his separation from the organization and his founding of the Fuller Center for Housing in 2005. He died Feb. 3 following a brief illness. He was 74.

“Millard Fuller was a force of nature who turned a simple idea into an international organization that has helped more than 300,000 families move from deplorable housing into simple, decent homes they helped build and can afford to buy and live in,” said Jonathan Reckford, chief executive officer of Habitat for Humanity International. “The entire Habitat family mourns the loss of our founder, a true giant in the affordable housing movement. Our prayers are with the entire Fuller family.”

The idea for Habitat for Humanity was born at Koinonia Farm, a Christian farming community founded in 1942 in rural southwest Georgia to be a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.” Millard and Linda Fuller made their way to that demonstration plot in 1965.

By the time Millard Fuller turned 29, he had earned his first million dollars as an entrepreneur and attorney. But as his finances flourished, his health and marriage crumbled. To save their marriage, the Fullers decided to begin anew. They sold all that they owned, gave the money to the poor and in their searching, landed at Koinonia where they began soaking up the teachings of farmer, theologian and community founder Clarence Jordan.

In time, Jordan and Fuller launched a program of “partnership housing,” building simple houses in partnership with rural neighbors who were too poor to qualify for conventional home loans. The first house was dedicated in 1969 and others soon followed. In 1973, the Fullers took the concept of partnership housing to Africa. Within a few years, simple concrete-block homes were replacing unhealthy mud-and-thatch homes ... and Millard Fuller had a bold idea: If partnership housing could improve lives in Georgia and Zaire, why not the rest of the world?

In 1976, the Fullers returned to the United States and launched Habitat for Humanity International. By the organization’s 25th anniversary, tens of thousands of people were volunteering with Habitat and more than 500,000 people were living in Habitat homes.

Millard Fuller was a prolific writer, authoring 10 books. He had received more than 50 honorary degrees and in 1996 received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor. In presenting the medal, President Bill Clinton said, “Millard Fuller has done as much to make the dream of homeownership a reality in our country and throughout the world as any living person.” Jack Kemp, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and former HFHI board member agreed, adding, “When I’m asked about housing success stories from our inner cities, the first group that comes to mind is Habitat for Humanity.”

Among numerous other awards, Fuller was named to the National Housing Hall of Fame and had received the World Changer Award, the World Methodist Peace Award, the Norman Vincent Peale Award, the John W. Gardner Leadership Award and the Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian Award.

“Millard Fuller’s drive and relentless commitment to affordable housing captured people’s imagination and changed lives around the world,” said J. Ronald Terwilliger, chair of Habitat for Humanity’s International Board of Directors. “His inspiration lives on in Habitat’s work and through its employees, volunteers, partner families and supporters. We extend our sincere condolences to the Fuller family and are keeping them in our thoughts and prayers.”