

Alachua Habitat for Humanity Helps Spark a Strong Community



Greater Duval is one of the longest-standing neighborhoods in Gainesville and among its first predominantly minority neighborhoods. It is a tightly bonded community with generational ties and a sense of togetherness. At the time [Alachua Habitat for Humanity](#) launched the Greater Duval Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative in 2013, a lack of businesses, investment and services in Greater Duval impeded community economic growth and quality of life.



Six years later, the Greater Duval Neighborhood is strong and thriving, led by an influential and effective neighborhood association partnering with Habitat to improve quality of life for thousands of residents. Residents formed [the Greater Duval Neighborhood Association](#) (GDNA) in 2014. Key to the establishment of GDNA was Habitat's commitment to providing training to community members, convening residents and organizations and stepping back so residents could step up to lead their own neighborhood revitalization.

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And step up they did. Now an independent 501(c)3, the resident-led GDNA advances community-identified goals at both the city and neighborhood level. Among its accomplishments are stopping an oil facility from being built in the neighborhood and was the catalyst in the city establishing an ordinance to protect neighborhood autonomy. GDNA built a community park and vegetable garden and provides senior, men's and youth programs, adult education, tutoring, and

job assistance.

Carla Lewis-Miles, a Greater Duval resident and Neighborhood Revitalization Coordinator for Alachua Habitat for Humanity, credits Habitat's approach for achieving substantial results. "Habitat built trust and put residents at the center of planning. Even when they did not understand everything the residents wanted to do, they supported us. Now we have a strategic plan that is better than anything that could come from the outside because the residents have ownership in it."

There was no resident association when Alachua Habitat invited residents to engage in the neighborhood revitalization initiative. Alachua Habitat served as the fiscal sponsor and convener of organizations and residents. Carla and Andrew were among the first resident leaders to join. "I became involved because it's where we live and where my children live," Carla says. "There were outside agencies saying they want to help, but they didn't know what to do. So, I came up with a plan. I wanted Duval to mirror the opportunities in other parts of Gainesville."

Alachua Habitat facilitated a group of residents to attend a 3-day training to increase their skills, knowledge and capacity to lead neighborhood initiatives. "We left the training with a blueprint for how to set up our organization," Andrew Miles, the Operating Officer of the Duval Neighborhood Association says. "We met leaders from around the state and drew inspiration from what other residents were already doing."

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In order to inform [GDNA strategic planning](#), Alachua Habitat supported the GDNA and residents in their efforts to collect over 250 surveys door-to-door to learn what projects the community wanted to work on and spread information about the GDNA and other initiatives.

“We hired residents to do our surveying and this resulted in building trust. Residents are more apt to talk openly and honestly with other residents,” Carla says.

Today, GDNA and Habitat are two nonprofits who partner closely. Their work goes beyond programming to influencing systems and policy through lobbying and grassroots mobilization. Among their goals are increased housing affordability and ownership, neighborhood economic opportunity, youth and adult learning, sense of community and environmental quality.

“Grow your neighborhoods from the ground-up rather than outside-in. Because then it becomes the neighborhood revitalizing itself rather than outsiders’ ideas of what revitalization is. In Duval, the residents’ vision goes further than what the outside groups’ vision was. The outsiders’ vision was superficial, like cleaning up and painting. Our vision is deep. It empowers, redevelops and restructures systems. We are changing cultures and social habits. It is slowly happening. There is a group of residents coming together slowly, slowly and building stronger, stronger. And it is going to be a sustainable revitalization rather than a superficial program,” Andrew says.

Now, Carla and Andrew are inspiring other neighborhoods. Connect with them through [GDNA](#).