

Hello,

My name is [REDACTED] and my family and I are the occupants at the [REDACTED] Habitat for Humanity home. Back in April of 2020 I was welcomed into the program, and I cannot thank all of you enough for the incredible opportunity of home ownership that you have provided me. In the two years that I have been part of the program I have seen both myself and my children flourish. My son, [REDACTED], has excelled in karate and just recently made the BC Team. He will be representing British Columbia in Newfoundland in July – with the chance to make Team Canada! I have experience profound healing around my fear of money and loss and am even thinking about opportunities that I have to give back to my community (stay tuned!)

This program, and your dedication, is a testament to the importance of affordable home ownership. Thank you.

I am writing under somewhat uncomfortable circumstances, however, and I am wanting to express that by no means am I not grateful for the opportunity that I have been given. I must preface that I do fear that if I speak up that my place with Habitat for Humanity could be jeopardized, although I know this isn't something that I should have to worry about. By no means am I wanting to exit this program, I am just looking to be heard.

What I am mainly wanting to address is the inequity, and now seemingly adversarial nature (simply for asking “why”), in which volunteer hours are awarded. I have experienced policies change, and reasoning be unfairly applied. You may have heard that I have asked to have volunteer hours awarded for the tiling that I completed in my house and that I have been denied. While I am still pursuing this, I have to assure you that it is less about the hours (a total of 20 hours for myself and 20 hours for a friend that helped) and more about the principal.

The tiling hours that I am asking for is a job that I undertook to finish the kitchen. The countertops that were installed in my house did not have a protecting lip to prevent water damage. I had received permission from Yolanda, and she signed off on the countertops without backsplash lips, as we had discussed me eventually tiling the backsplash. When I was welcomed into my home in November 2020, I was cautioned by Tiffany that because there was no lip that I had to be very careful with water since any water that dripped down the back could ruin the countertops that were installed.

Protecting and taking care of the beautiful home I have been entrusted with is a priority to me, and in January of 2021 I installed the tile backsplash. I purchased the tiles, I rented the tile saw, and with the help of a friend, I spent the weekend (two full days) planning, cutting, mudding and mortaring the backsplash. I am incredibly proud of how it turned out, and am really happy that I could put a lovely touch on one of Habitat's homes. I know that when the time comes for me to move on, that the next family will appreciate that the home has been well loved and taken care of.

During this time, I was told I was unable to help out with the Bakerview build. I was told specifically that polices said that only place I could get hours was on my own build – however, due to the arrangement, Gary Lunn was taking care of all the build so there were no hours available to me. While all the other families were having hours available on the build site (and their friends were allowed to come help), I was accumulating hours at the ReStore.

In the summer of 2020, there was a painting opportunity at [REDACTED] place – she had just purchased her home and wanted to put a fresh coat of paint on the walls of her suite. A few of us helped her out and earned hours.

Shortly after this, [REDACTED] were welcomed into the program, and due to the state that the home they were moving into was in, they earned the majority of their hours repairing, cleaning and doing work at their future home. There were a few opportunities available to help out to earn hours. At this time, the policy changed. And now, I was allowed to help out with other people's places to earn hours.

I am a single mom. I don't have family that lives in Victoria, and the majority of my friends are parents of my kid's friends. Throughout the pandemic the messaging from Bonnie Henry has been to limit exposures. It did not feel right, to me, to ask my friends to come to the Restore to help me earn my hours when this was somewhat contrary to the public health orders for the majority of my two years to get my 500 volunteer hours in.

Despite this I have worked incredibly hard and have accumulated the majority of my hours all by myself. I believe, at this point I have been credited just 19 hours for friends that have come out and helped at the Restore although I can have up to 250 hours contributed by friends and family. I am sure Jenessa (who was the volunteer coordinator for most of my time while I've been getting my hours) can attest to the fact that I have been enthusiastically taking as many opportunities as I can. I am very close to finishing my hours.

When I asked if I could have the hours that I spent tiling count as volunteer hours, I was simply told "No", and when I asked why the reasons have ranged everything from the "the tile was too nice, and Habitat for Humanity doesn't need something that nice", to "it won't count because you were the one that provided and purchase the materials." None of these reasons seem to be consistent with what I am seeing other families get hours for.

[REDACTED] got to earn a lot of their hours cleaning, painting and repairing. Other families have earned hours for things such as staining fence panels (preventative maintenance), and I've even earned hours putting a fresh coat of paint on OTHER people's walls. The tiling was necessary. Without it, the counters would likely have started to bubble. The paint for [REDACTED] house, as far as I am aware, was something she purchased herself. So the reasoning that I can't get hours because I paid for the tiles myself is not consistent.

When Tiffany asked me if the reason I am trying to get the tile hours to count is because I am needing to find ways to complete my volunteer hours - I said yes. She then offered that I could volunteer at her mom's Not for Profit and use my accounting knowledge to prepare tax returns for seniors – and this would count for hours.

This is very confusing to me. I don't know why the time I put into finishing off a Habitat for Humanity home would not count, but I could volunteer at her mom's NFP and that would count?

Another thing to consider is the length of time it is taking for us to buy our homes due to the delays with the mortgage model coming together. It has now been almost two years since I've occupied the home, and the mortgage model is still not complete or offered yet. It seems an unreasonable amount of time for me to have gone without the tile to have taken this task on as a home owner. Simply, it needed to get done. The bathroom counters also do not have lips, but it's a lot easier keeping water from dripping backward in the bathroom than it is in the kitchen where my 9 year old washes dishes!

Ultimately, me finishing off the kitchen, protecting the countertops, took my time and I am asking if I can be awarded the volunteer hours just as [REDACTED] were awarded for the time they put into their house, just as I was for the time I put into [REDACTED] house, and just as other families have been awarded for the time they have put into finishing and building the homes they now occupy.

I also want to talk about some upsetting comments and situations that I encountered with Yolanda when she was the CEO:

1. Upsetting Comment: During the donor event at the Bakerview build site in August 2020, Yolanda made a comment about the pants I was wearing – specifically, she noted that I was wearing Lululemon branded pants and then loudly announced that she could not afford Lululemon and (rhetorically, I am assuming) shouted “who did the financial background on this girl – how can she afford Lululemon?” This was incredibly distressing. Not only was Yolanda in a place of power (as a determiner of who gets homes) her comments, I felt, were incredibly inappropriate and made me feel very self-conscious.
2. Hood Fan in my Home: As I understand, when Yolanda saw the hood fan that was installed in my house, she felt it looked way too nice and thought it should have been replaced with something that looked more ‘Habitat for Humanity’. While I admit this is all hearsay – I was not there, I did not hear it myself, nor can I attest to the nature of the comment – the comments still made their way to me and in a manner that suggested she was disapproving for the simple reason that it was “too nice” (not that it was too much, or out of budget.) This idea that something is “too nice” for me, because I am a Habitat for Humanity family, suggests to me, the CEO, feels I (and other Habitat for Humanity families) do not deserve nice things. Thankfully, I can see that this has nothing to do with me;

however, I have done a lot of work with my own money stories, and I know that comments like this can be very humiliating, distressing and harmful to some people who may have not. It may have been said in jest, however I just want to point out the potential harm these type of comments and mindset can cause.

3. Phone call, with Tiffany and Yolanda: Around May 2020, Yolanda called me, with Tiffany on the call as well. The conversation was so upsetting that it brought me to tears as Yolanda reprimanded me and accused me of going behind her back and customizing the [REDACTED] home. She accosted me for treating the house as though it was a “custom build” all because I had talked over an idea for the kitchen island placement with Gary Lunn one day when I had run into him at the build site. It was incredibly distressing, upsetting and left me terrified of what other completely innocent actions Yolanda could perceive as going behind her back. What was equally confusing was the next day, when she was unable to go to Harbour City Kitchens, she told me to go to Central Saanich to go pick all my finishing out since she didn't have the time. This back-and-forth left me feeling like I was walking on eggshells and therefore not comfortable raising any of the issues.

How this fits into the request for the hours to tile my backsplash is that it was Yolanda that said “No”, on account of the tile being too nice and not necessary for a Habitat Home. It was after Yolanda retired that I have now attempted to ask for those hours again as it has seemed she may have had a bias toward me (as well as all the other points I've made earlier in this letter), and that she seemed perceived Habitat families should not have nice things.

Another example of hours being awarded inconsistently was a delivery project for donor gifts last March/April 2021. There were three families that receive packages to drop off for donors and instead of being awarded hours for the time we spent doing it, we were given a rate – for each package that is delivered, 20 minutes was awarded. There were three routes determined, two of which had addresses very close together, and the last one had addresses ranging from Sooke, Oak Bay, Downtown to the Highlands. This was the route I received. However, I still took it and did my best and it ended up taking me longer than I was awarded. After this was done, I found out Tiffany granted the other two families 40 minutes per delivery: one family told her that they had brought a friend along to watch her kids (so Tiffany said her friend could claim those hours), and then Tiffany told the other family that if they brought a friend along they could claim 40 mins per delivery. Tiffany never told me. When I claimed my deliveries, I was only awarded 20 mins per delivery.

Finally, another project that I have asked about is getting volunteers to help to dig trenches for an irrigation system.

The way my lawn is oriented, it takes me over two hours to water my lawn. I have water restrictions that mean I have to be finished watering my lawn before 7am. Again, I take so much pride in my house and want to take care of the beautiful landscaping that was

donated – which includes the yard. In the summer last year, the lawn died. My house is right on the corner of a lovely new subdivision of homes with owners that take pride and care of their landscaping.

Late last year I asked if it was possible to do this as a project and be a way for other families to get some volunteer (and friend) hours on a weekend. I got approval in principle and was told it sounded like a great idea. David pulled my lot plans and even reached out to a company down the street to find out what materials I would need to complete it. While I was asking about why my tile hours would not count, but this project would, I was abruptly told that the irrigation project would no longer be approved.

It's this back and forth that is confusing. The inconsistent application of awarding volunteer hours starts to feel personal. I was told that a house my size doesn't need an irrigation system; however, it's not about the size. It's more how the lawn is spread over 5 distinct sections that need to be watered, and require me moving the sprinkler 4 times, that becomes challenging to keep up with.

Despite Bakerview having extensive landscaping, and irrigation, I was prepared to pay for the materials and permits myself. All I was asking for was the helping hands to dig the trenches. I also was budgeting my volunteer hours based on the approval of this project that I received. This is something that doesn't cost Habitat for Humanity any additional money, allows me to take care of the beautiful home I am in, and also provides future Habitat for Humanity families and occupants a benefit.

In summary, it's not about the hours – it truly isn't. I will continue to volunteer and promote Habitat for Humanity long after I finish my 500 hours, and long after I outgrow the program. This is about the inconsistent experience I've had when it comes to volunteer hours being awarded, some of the harmful and toxic experiences that have impacted me, and I figured this would be something the board would want to know about so that improvements can be made.

Thank you,

-Erin