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Millard Fuller, 74, Who Founded Habitat for Humanity, Is Dead

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

Millard Fuller, who at 29 walked away from his life as a successful businessman to devote himself to the poor, eventually starting [Habitat for Humanity](#) International, which spread what he called “the theology of the hammer” by building more than 300,000 homes worldwide, died Tuesday near Americus, Ga. He was 74.

His brother, Doyle, said Mr. Fuller became ill with a severe headache and chest pains and was taken to a hospital in Americus, his hometown. He died in an ambulance on the way to a larger hospital in Albany, Ga. Doyle Fuller said the cause had not been determined, but may have been an aneurysm.

Propelled by his strong Christian principles, Millard Fuller used Habitat to develop a system of using donated money and material, and voluntary labor, to build homes for low-income families. The homes are sold without profit and buyers pay no interest. Buyers are required to help build their houses, contributing what Mr. Fuller called sweat equity.

More than a million people live in the homes, which are in more than 100 countries. There are 180 in New York City, including some that former President [Jimmy Carter](#), a longtime Habitat supporter and volunteer, personally helped construct. Mr. Carter said of him on Tuesday that “he was an inspiration to me, other members of our family, and an untold number of volunteers who worked side by side under his leadership.”

Former President [Bill Clinton](#) has also volunteered on Habitat projects. When he presented Mr. Fuller the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996, he said, “I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that Millard Fuller has literally revolutionized the concept of philanthropy.”

Mr. Fuller said his inspiration came from the Bible, starting with the injunction in Exodus 22:25 against charging interest to the poor. He spoke of the “economics of Jesus” and insisted that providing shelter to all was “a matter of conscience.” Christianity Today in 1999 called him “God’s contractor.”

His skills included fund-raising finesse, an exuberant speaking style and a talent for making use of the news media. In 1986, The Chicago Tribune quoted him asking a publicity man about a woman in front of her ramshackle apartment, “Don’t you think that’d make some great pictures to show her in that rat-infested place?”

The article later said Mr. Fuller did not expect to house the world. “Instead,” it said, “he sees Habitat as a hammer that can drive the image of a woman in a rat-infested apartment as deep into the mind of America as the image of an African child with a distended stomach.”

Mr. Fuller liked to tell and re-tell the stories of his earliest houses. One man had moved from a leaky shack into a new house.

“When it rains, I love to sit by the window and see it raining outside,” one new homeowner said, “and it ain’t raining on me!”

Another new resident saw his new home as a literal resurrection. “Being in this house is like we were dead and buried, and got dug up!” she said.

In 2005, a woman employed by Habitat accused Mr. Fuller of verbally and physically harassing her, a widely publicized charge that an investigation by the organization did not prove. But he and a new generation of Habitat board members were disagreeing on organizational and other issues, and he and his wife agreed to resign.

Mr. Fuller started a new organization called the Fuller Center for Housing. It is active in 24 states and 14 foreign countries.

Millard Dean Fuller was born on Jan. 3, 1935, in Lanett, Ala., then a small cotton-mill town. His mother died when he was 3, and his father remarried. Millard’s business career began at 6 when his father gave him a pig. He fattened it up and sold it for \$11. Soon he was buying and selling more pigs, then rabbits and chickens as well. He dabbled in selling worms and minnows to fishermen.

When he was 10, his father acquired 400 acres of farmland, and Mr. Fuller sold his small animals to raise cattle. He remembered helping his father repair a tiny, ramshackle shack that an elderly couple had inhabited on the property. He was thrilled to see their joy when the work was complete.

Mr. Fuller went to [Auburn University](#), running unsuccessfully for student body president, and in 1956 was a delegate to the [Democratic National Convention](#) in Chicago. He graduated from Auburn with a degree in economics in 1957 and entered the [University of Alabama](#) School of Law.

He and Morris S. Dees Jr., another law student, decided to go into business together while in the law school. They set a goal: get rich.

They built a successful direct-mail operation, published student directories and set up a service to send cakes to students on their birthdays. They also bought dilapidated real estate and refurbished it themselves. They graduated and went into law practice together after Mr. Fuller briefly served in the Army as a lieutenant.

As law partners, they continued to make money. Selling 65,000 locally produced tractor cushions to the Future Farmers of America made \$75,000. Producing cookbooks for the Future Homemakers of America did even better, and they became one of the nation's largest cookbook publishers. By 1964, they were millionaires. Mr. Dees went on to help found the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Mr. Fuller's life changed completely after his wife, the former Linda Caldwell, whom he had married in 1959, threatened to leave him. She was frustrated that her busy husband was almost never around, and she had had an affair, their friend Bettie B. Youngs wrote in "The House That Love Built" (2007), a joint biography. For the rest of his career, he talked openly about repairing the marriage.

There was much soul-searching. Finally, the two agreed to start their life anew on Christian principles. Eschewing material things was the first step. Gone were the speedboat, the lakeside cabin, the fancy cars.

The Fullers went to Koinonia Farm, a Christian community in Georgia, where they planned their future with Clarence Jordan, a Bible scholar and leader there. In 1968, they began building houses for poor people nearby, then went to Zaire in 1973 to start a project that ultimately built 114 houses.

In 1976, a group met in a converted chicken barn at Koinonia Farm and started Habitat for Humanity International. Participants agreed the organization would work through local chapters. They decided to accept government money only for infrastructure improvements like streets and sidewalks.

Handwritten notes from the meeting stated the group's grand ambition: to build housing for a million low-income people. That goal was reached in August 2005, when home number 200,000 was built. Each home houses an average of five people.

The farm announced plans for a simple public burial service for Mr. Fuller on Wednesday.

Besides his brother, Doyle, of Montgomery, Ala., and his wife, Mr. Fuller is survived by their son, Christopher, of Macon, Ga.; their daughters, Kim Isakson of Argyle, Tex., Faith Umstattd of Americus, and Georgia Luedi of Jacksonville, Fla.; and nine grandchildren.

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Fuller Center built a house in Shreveport, La., for a mother and her daughters, one named Genesis, the other Serenity. Mr. Fuller loved the religious connotations he saw in their names.

"What will little Genesis become?" he asked at the time. "What will little Serenity become? We don't know, but we know one thing: if we give them a good place to live, they've got a better chance."