

35 Years Of...

# COMMUNITY-LED VISION



Cheryl Mitchell, founding board member of the Addison County Community Trust, now known as Addison Housing Works

## A FOUNDER'S STORY

The theme of our 35th anniversary is "Growing Community" and since you can't have growth without roots, in this piece we decided to go all the way back to the beginning to find ours. We reached out to one of our founding board members, Cheryl Mitchell, to learn more about what inspired a group of community leaders to come together in 1989 to found our organization. For her, the spark grew out of parents who always made sure that "friends, neighbors, and total strangers got what they needed," followed by a career at the Parent Child Center bearing witness to the power of housing to strengthen families. Read on for the full story.

*This article is part of a series of vignettes Addison Housing Works is publishing to celebrate our impact over 35 years of providing safe, quality, affordable homes and related supports for low- and moderate-income families, seniors, and individuals.*

# ROOTED IN

@addisonhousingworks

## HELPING FAMILIES

Maybe my interest in affordable housing started when a friend and I would go down to the neighborhood stream to build tiny towns out of twigs and stones. Or when, as a teen, I participated in a workcamp building simple housing for blueberry pickers in New Jersey. Or when Don and I moved to Vermont and attempted to turn an old barn into our new home. Maybe it was the general influence of my parents, who were not “religious” in the traditional sense, but who did as much as anyone I know to make sure that friends, neighbors, and total strangers got what they needed: a ride to the store, a home cooked meal, help finding a job or a place to live, a sense of value and belonging in the community.

The major impetus for me getting involved in organized efforts to promote affordable housing came from the families I learned from at the Parent/Child Center. Growing up in a suburban community, I had been shocked to find children living in abandoned school buses, shacks without electricity or running water, or on the couches of their parent’s friends’ homes. Initially our staff leaned on friends and realtors to “take a chance” on people who had no previous experience renting. Some beautiful, long-term relationships were developed in this way. And too many situations did not work out well for anyone involved.

As the need for decent, affordable housing grew, we began partnering with other groups: the clergy rental assistance fund, advocacy to expand Section 8, basic skills training for renters, helping ACCAG (now called HOPE) in rehabbing old apartment buildings, supporting Habitat for Humanity, and creating affordable housing coalitions at the local and state levels.

*“Maybe it is time for us all to set a new stretch goal?”*

The tipping point for me was the year the old Town and Country Trailer Park [now Otter Creek Manufactured Housing Community, pictured on page one] in Vergennes came on the market. We staff lobbied our Board heavily to buy the park to assure housing for many of our families. The Board chair wisely (although I was angry about it at the time) said he appreciated what we wanted to do, but providing affordable housing for the whole community was not the P/CC mission. Reluctantly, we agreed to start a new organization: ACCT (Addison County Community Trust, now known as Addison Housing Works). As in the early years of the Parent/Child Center, a group of concerned community members got together and got to work. We set a stretch goal that 10% of the housing units in Addison County would be affordable within 10 years. And with much hard work and creativity, that goal was reached.

Now, my involvement in affordable housing issues is mostly from the sidelines: advocating that migrant families in our community be given full legal status and decent housing and working toward the day everyone in Vermont has access to publicly supported health care. It is thrilling to watch the sea change as people recognize housing as one of the key social determinants of health. Maybe it is time for us all to set a new stretch goal?

-Cheryl Mitchell, Founding Board Member

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