

# Furnish Hope: Turning Houses into Homes

by **RONNI WILDE — CBN Reporter**

For many founders of nonprofits, the decision to start a company with little to no money for the purpose of helping others is often the result of a profound moment in their lives; a feeling that the work is something they simply must do, and the passion and drive to move forward with it is something they just can't shake.

Such was the case for Megan Martin, founding director and CEO of Furnish Hope in Bend, who says she had a calling following a traumatic time in her own life, and she was so certain it was what she was meant to do that she and her husband funded the program by maxing out their own personal credit cards to get it started.

"Furnish Hope started in 2018, and came to me through a vision I received," says Martin. She had been working in education for 20 years, and says she felt like she was living out her life's calling. "I was doing my dream job and I loved it. But in 2017, I found myself unexpectedly reassigned. It was devastating to me. It was heartbreaking and threw my heart into a million pieces." In the year that followed, she says she was certain she'd wind up getting another job in education, but that didn't happen. "I started praying and crying out, asking God what to do and seeking next steps." She says she was expecting an opportunity to lead another school to come along, but the answer she got was radically different. "I got a text message from Westside Church's outreach department about a mom leaving Bethlehem Inn with her three kids, starting life over, and she needed an apartment full of furnishings. When I got that text, I received a vision so profound that it left me wrecked on the floor weeping. God showed me the answer to my prayers, and it was to create a nonprofit to furnish homes for people who were going through something traumatic and working hard to help themselves but couldn't do it all alone. We were to come alongside and just give them hope. Furnish Hope was born from that."

Martin says that at first, she didn't tell anyone about her experience, and she tried to ignore it, still wanting to go back into education. But when a second text came in a week later, she received a more detailed vision, complete with instructions on how to execute the nonprofit, and where to begin. "I was so terrified. I thought my husband would think I was crazy. I told him about it, and said I'd understand if he wanted to leave me," she says with a laugh. "He was so

understanding. We bought the furniture on our credit cards, believing that people would one day donate. We started with Habitat for Humanity, and God told me we'd furnish all their homes." At that point, Martin met with Robin Cooper (Engle) at Bend-Redmond Habitat for Humanity, who suggested she start with just one house. "But I told her God had told me to do them all. There were 22!" The women formed a partnership, she says, and when Martin learned that often the Habitat recipient families were scraping together every penny just to get into the new homes, she says she realized the dire need for this program. "They often didn't even have a mattress; sometimes they were sleeping in a friend's room on the floor or on a mattress that needed to go to the dump. All of a sudden, my eyes were wide open, and I was seeing and understanding the need in our community in such a deeper way."

It was October 2018 when Martin first got the vision for Furnish Hope, and in January 2019, she created the business plan. "I also began meeting with realtors. Part of the vision I believed was that we were to be self-sustaining to a degree by fundraising through a social-service activity." This led to staging homes for people who were selling their houses to create revenue to purchase the furniture to give away. "I started meeting with realtors and asked them to hire me to stage the houses to support the mission. That grew quickly; within six months, we had staged over 20 homes and furnished eight Habitat houses. And we were in debt. Our credit cards were maxed out because we were buying all this furniture to stage homes and to give away."

Then in October 2019, Martin says something "miraculous and radical" happened. "We were asked to furnish a house for seven guys transitioning into a halfway house from Shepherd's House. I said 'yes,' but we had nothing." She continues, "I felt led to call the owner of College Hunks (hauling and moving company in Bend). I didn't know him, but I knew his name and had his number. He had just gotten a call from Eagle Crest Resort minutes earlier. Eagle Crest was renovating 80 cabins and wanted to clear out everything. They brought three massive moving trucks full of furniture to us. Mattresses were popping out of the warehouse; we had so much stuff."

As if that weren't enough, Martin said she and her friend Deborah Asato, who now serves as COO of Furnish Hope, felt that there

was supposed to be even more to the program. "We sat down to have lunch one day, and there on the counter was the *Source Weekly* guide to all the nonprofits. We thought we could reach out to all the other nonprofits too." She continues, "So in a year, we went from furnishing 22 Habitat homes to partnering with 52 agencies, and we now furnish over 30 homes per month. As of June, July and August of this year, we are receiving more than 40 referrals a month. It's increased due to COVID, but also, awareness has increased the referrals." She says Furnish Hope serves families on a weekly basis in Madras, Warm Springs, Prineville and La Pine, but that 50 percent of the families they serve are from Bend. "The need is all around us. When you walk into homes and see the bags of clothes, the blankets on the floor, you realize that there are a lot of people who have houses, but not homes."

Right now, Furnish Hope is very busy, Martin says. "We went from just me and my family helping to hiring two other full-time partners, Deborah and Mary Barlow, who is CFO, by October 2019." In that first summer, they had one to two volunteers, she says. Now, they have 71 volunteers each week who help support the organization in various ways. "We furnish homes in all three counties (in Central Oregon), furnishing entire homes, with five to ten home deliveries per week. Last summer, we were furnishing about ten homes per month, so the number has tripled."

As for fundraising, Martin says their very first event was going to be right before COVID hit, so they had to shut it down. "But we have moved forward with grant writing. We were able to raise our goal for 2020 of \$100,000, and our goal for 2021 is to raise another \$100,000. Our big push will be in November and December. We will try to raise the final \$60,000 in the last two months." She says her team is grateful for all the help and feels that they have been "incredibly" supported. "We have over 20 business partners who support us with storage space, gas, bags and laundry; staging companies and home décor stores that donate inventory; and Sunriver Resort has donated furniture. Westside Church purchased and donated a 26-foot box truck to help us, and High Desert Insurance runs TV commercials for us. That's been a huge blessing for us; we



(L-R) FURNISH HOPE DIRECTORS MARY BARLOW, DEBORAH ASATO, MEGAN MARTIN | PHOTO COURTESY OF FURNISH HOPE

receive lots of donations from that." She adds, "CoEnergy Propane has also just recently donated. We've been overwhelmed."

Martin says Furnish Hope just received a \$25,000 grant from Les Schwab to purchase another truck to help with furniture moving. "We are searching for a good truck that is not outrageously priced right now. As referrals increase, we need more towing capacity. We don't want people waiting for furniture."

For those who wish to donate, the Furnish Hope warehouse, located in donated space at 1006 SE 9th Street, is open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9-11am for donation drop-offs. They accept gently used furniture, housewares, kitchen items, linens and other items that help turn empty houses into homes.

"The three of us who run Furnish Hope have been astounded by the generosity and desire of people in this community to make a difference in the lives of individuals. The circle of giving has grown and grown. People feel inspired to call to come be a part of what we are doing; they are stirred to help people who have a face and a name in their community." She adds, "I've been collaborating with other nonprofit leaders over the past year and a half, and we all work very closely together. Through our collective work and sharing of resources, we are standing in the gap with one another for these families. That's how the work gets done. We have a very special nonprofit community here in Central Oregon, and we all want to join hands and work together. It's been incredible to see businesses, individuals and agencies be a part of creating hope in our region. At a time like this, we all need hope."

[furnishhope.com](http://furnishhope.com)

## From Bend to Ethiopia, ReachAnother is Changing Lives Across the Globe

by **CHLOE HONAKER, Executive Administrator — ReachAnother Foundation**

Most of us envision retirement as a time to slow down, relax, take up new hobbies, work on our golf game—not so for Dr. Marinus Koning, who has changed the lives of thousands of families in Ethiopia through his organization, ReachAnother Foundation. The story of ReachAnother starts in 2009 when Marinus embarked on a medical mission to Ethiopia just after finishing a long and fulfilling 35-year career as a surgeon in Central Oregon. Quickly after arriving there, Marinus noticed an alarming rate of preventable birth defects (spina bifida and hydrocephalus), a severe lack of medical capacity and little access to necessary surgical equipment to provide adequate care.

With only one neurosurgeon to serve the entire 90+ million population of Ethiopia at the time, many children were put on long waiting lists for a surgery that would not arrive in time. Marinus invited his identical twin brother, Jan, who is also a retired surgeon, to join him in Ethiopia and ReachAnother Foundation (also affectionately known as the "NGO of the Twins,") was founded by Marinus in the United States and Jan in the Netherlands to train neurosurgeons and build medical

capacity to address the neural tube defect crisis in Ethiopia.

In the last 12 years, ReachAnother has provided funding for over 7,500 brain and spinal surgeries for children born with life threatening birth defects, helped train 49 neurosurgeons and donated over \$1 million of medical equipment and supplies.

Today, ReachAnother is fighting to prevent these birth defects before they happen using a very valuable public health tool: food fortification with folic acid. Many higher income countries like the United States fortify flour with folic acid to decrease the prevalence of spina bifida and hydrocephalus, however flour is not widely consumed in Ethiopia so ReachAnother had to find a more creative approach. The project is moving quickly, with the first stages of the study of salt fortification already underway. This study will confirm the viability and effectiveness of salt fortification in Ethiopia, with an eye for expansion into other countries facing the challenges of folic acid preventable birth defects in the near future. Once successfully completed and implemented, this project will provide a national solution for 84 percent of Ethiopian women of reproductive

age that are at risk of having a child with these serious birth defects. The findings produced will present the necessary evidence-based metrics to ignite a movement for change making Ethiopia a trailblazer in the global movement to prevent thousands of cases of spina bifida and hydrocephalus worldwide.

ReachAnother Foundation is also working with hospitals in the US and in the Netherlands to give thousands of medical instruments a fresh lease on life through the Circular Instrument Project. The instruments are carefully selected and where necessary refurbished and sent to the Ethiopian Ministry of Health for the "Saving Lives Through Safe Surgery" initiative. Dr. Koning said, "Good tools are half the work and we were told stories by newly graduated neurosurgeons in Ethiopia that they could not perform surgery because of a lack of medical instruments. They were moved to tears when we gave them what they needed to start applying their skills with patients immediately."



DR. MARINUS KONING | PHOTO COURTESY OF REACHANOTHER FOUNDATION

If you would like to get involved and support ReachAnother, consider attending their annual "Evening for Ethiopia" Gala on Saturday, October 23 at Aspen Hall for an Ethiopian inspired dinner, live auction, marketplace, dessert dash and more. Seats are limited this year so buy your tickets early at [reachanother.org](http://reachanother.org). The ReachAnother Gala is presented by The Ladd Group and Cascade Sotheby's. Their generous support contributes to creating a better world for all children. Special thanks to Cascade Publications for highlighting ReachAnother's important work.

[reachanother.org](http://reachanother.org)