



# Keystone Challenge Fund

## Making the Dream of Homeownership Real

JEFF BAGWELL

I'm honored to have the Keystone Challenge Fund story included in the Florida Housing Coalition's Journal at this bittersweet time. It's hard to tell our story in 500 or so words, but I'm going to try.

We opened our doors 30 years ago on a shoestring. I had previously been a banker in the corporate world, but having been raised by a Baptist Minister, I was drawn to mission-based work. The mission of our nonprofit, Keystone Challenge Fund, was to help lower income families in Polk County realize the American Dream of homeownership. In our first year we had put 19 families into homes and by the second year we helped 99 families purchase homes.

The dream of home ownership: the stability it provides to children who are no longer forced

to change schools with each successive move from one rental to another and the wealth building that families achieve from homeownership is what has driven the Keystone Challenge Fund from its inception. We have had over 25,000 people attend our Homebuyer Education classes. In 2014, we started a program for Veterans and First Responders with 70 homes that were donated to our organization.

**Fast forward thirty years, we have now assisted 4,600 families to become homeowners. That sounds like a lot, and we are so happy for every one of the families we helped. But the sad truth is that this number could have been between 8,000 and 9,000 families; we could have helped more than twice as many households if the Florida Legislature had not raided the SHIP funds for so many years.**

I feel blessed to have been a part of helping so many families and to have led a successful business serving Polk County for so many years. And I am so pleased that our important work will continue under the expanded operations of HANDS of Central Florida. The very capable, Jill McReynolds, the long-time executive director of HANDS, will open an office in

Polk County on January 1, 2022 with three of our current staff members joining her.



Jeff Bagwell is the President and Executive Director of Keystone Challenge Fund. He received a Gubernatorial appointment to the State Affordable Housing Study Commission in 2008 and served on the Board of the Florida Housing Coalition for 10 years, holding the positions of Vice Chairman and Chairman. The City of Lakeland presented Keystone Challenge with a proclamation of Keystone Challenge Fund Day on October 4th, 2021 in honor of its 30 years of accomplishments.