

# At 85, MennoHomes founder shows no sign of slowing down



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Martin Buhr, seen at Beyond Housing's recent expansion in St. Jacobs, has already raised more than \$100,000 for the non-profit's annual bike-a-thon. [Submitted]

After a lifetime of working for charities and not profits, Martin Buhr is not planning on slowing down anytime soon, even at the age of 85.

"One could do that, but that's like rotting – rotting physically and mentally and spiritually – just to assume a position of non-involvement. That's shutting yourself off from the dynamism of life. It's very dynamic to stay engaged and healthy, and there's lots of benefits to me," Buhr said.

Buhr worked for 20 years as the executive director of the House of Friendship, retiring in 1998. Three years later, he became the founding president of MennoHomes (now Beyond Housing), staying in the position until his second retirement in 2014. His desire to help others stems from his upbringing in a Manitoba Mennonite community.

“The hub of all our life was church and school. And my teachers were Mennonite teachers, so the core values of my faith were reinforced on a daily basis by family, school and church. Service to God means service to humanity. That was the equation. And I bought it. Before my teen years, every cell, every fibre of my being wished to be of service to humanity as a way of serving God,” he explained.

After he was asked to join the non-profit affordable housing organization, MennoHomes’s first office was in the basement of the home he shared with his wife, Pauline Sawatzky Buhr, who passed in 2007.

Reflecting on the organization’s beginnings and the highlights of his time there, Buhr said there were “surprising kinds of support that we could respond to and creatively make something out of.”

That includes being approached in 2011 by a property development company in Waterloo willing to donate the top three floors of a condo development to MennoHomes. Buhr’s church provided a \$30,000 interest-free loan when the organization was just getting started and was short on cash.

“That was really a highlight that they came to me and said, ‘We know your dilemma and here’s some resource capital to help you get started,’” Buhr said of the loan.

Getting that support was “critical,” he added, noting that it would have taken longer for the non-profit to become successful without it.



"We would have been able to receive donations eventually from people who wanted to support us, but right at that moment, there was nothing in the bank. To even hire a lawyer to do the charter, to do the application to provincial and federal governments, it costs money."

Although he left the organization 10 years ago, Buhr has remained supportive of its work, explained Beyond Housing's current executive director, Dan Driedger.

"He continues to be passionate about the issue of housing. And in addition to doing what he can, he's used his network of people to encourage, invite or challenge others to also step up and help and people have responded," said Driedger.

MennoHomes changed its name to Beyond Housing in early 2023, and Buhr says he liked the switch, noting that it reinforces the idea of being "holistic in the delivery of housing."

"One model of doing housing is to be the developer and landlord, create the building, open it up for tenancies, and then collect the rent. That's one kind of concept and relationship to your tenants. In our case, we always wanted to be holistic about it, do what we could to make it a success for those who live in our units," he said.

Buhr's support includes frequently being one of the leading fundraisers for the annual Out-Spok'n Bike-a-thon. With this year's event set for June 8, Buhr aimed to raise \$85,000 to celebrate his 85th birthday, which was in January. To do so, he set the goal of riding 850 km on his bike between his birthday and the day of the fundraiser. Using his bike, which converts from road use to stationary for days with bad weather, Buhr has already ridden 600 km and raised more than \$100,000.

"He's not a young guy. I don't think anyone who's 85 pretends they're middle aged...I'm impressed. I mean, I haven't done 850 kilometers in the last, I don't know, probably ever," Driedger said of Buhr's accomplishment.

The donations have poured in, including a longtime donor of Buhr's rides giving \$85.85 and a family foundation donating \$8,500.

“So I had both extremes – the \$85 and \$8,500 – so then it felt feasible we could get there,” he said.

The June 8 bike-a-thon will start at 9 a.m. with two separate groups of riders on the Kissing Bridge Trail to either Wallenstein or the covered bridge in West Montrose. According to Driedger, the aim is to raise the final \$100,000 to cover the remaining costs of the capital campaign for the Sprucelawn expansion in St. Jacobs.



To support Martin’s efforts, visit his Canada Helps fundraising page here:

<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/mennohomes-inc/p2p/Martins-85th/>

You can learn more about the Out-Spok’n for Affordable Housing bike-a-thon on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024 here: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/mennohomes-inc/p2p/Out-SpoknXIVBike-a-Thon2024/>