

# JON BON JOVI MARIA CUOMO COLE

On Rethinking Homelessness in America



## Jon Bon Jovi

Musician, father, philanthropist, and professional sports team owner Jon Bon Jovi is a motivating force on the issue of affordable housing and poverty in America. His partnerships with Project HOME, HELP USA, Habitat for Humanity, and Kenneth Cole Productions have helped create new homes for low-income families from Louisiana to Pennsylvania. As co-owner of the Philadelphia Soul Arena Football team, Bon Jovi introduced a new type of philanthropy, making it the team's mission to make a difference in their community.

→ [projecthome.com](http://projecthome.com); [habitat.org](http://habitat.org); [philadelphiasoul.com](http://philadelphiasoul.com)

## Maria Cuomo Cole

Maria Cuomo Cole is the chairperson of HELP USA, the nation's largest nonprofit builder, developer, and operator of permanent and transitional housing with on-site services for the homeless. Founded in New York by her brother Andrew Cuomo in 1986, the organization under her leadership has grown nationally, providing services in job training, domestic violence, and affordable housing.

→ [helpusa.org](http://helpusa.org)

**MCC:** Jon, you have used your celebrity and resources to benefit others throughout your career. What inspired you to address the complex issues of poverty and homelessness?

**JB:** It's a timeless, classic problem. It was just realizing that this was something that can affect anyone at any time, from all walks of life. Urban blight is something that you can keep turning your head away from and eventually the structure that was lower- to middle-class neighborhoods is not going to survive. The sad part is that first it is going to crumble. That doesn't mean that there still is not pride in those who are living in these circumstances. So I have begun my education on the issue, and for the last five years, I think we have begun to make a difference.

As an owner of the Philadelphia Soul Arena Football team, the way to differentiate ourselves from what we would consider the big four—baseball, basketball, football, and hockey—was to be very involved in the community. So from day one, before we sold a ticket, before we played a down, we took the first \$100,000 we had and found four worthwhile charities. In time we focused our efforts on the homeless issue and were introduced to Sister Mary Scullion, who works with Project HOME. They deal in every aspect of homelessness, from helping people with mental illness and alcohol problems to getting them legal and medical advice, but what excited me most of all was their job training and service providing. It was the old adage of giving a man a fish or teaching him how to fish. I liked the idea and the concept very much, and asked how the Soul Foundation could make a difference. Sister Mary said, "It would be great if after so many years, you guys could contribute enough to build a

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**FACT**

- An average of 754,000 Americans are homeless on any given night.
- 66% of the homeless are single adults.
- 34% are families with children.
- 65% are men.
- 19% are veterans.
- 13% are employed.

house here on this street.” My focus wasn’t one home; it was on bringing back the whole block. With the help of local and state government, private donations, and our donations, both personally and from our foundation, we were able to succeed. Since then, we have provided twenty-one families in Philadelphia with a place to call home and more recently have begun a major renovation on an adjacent homeless shelter in the neighborhood for veterans. We now plan to use that as the model going forward to bring what we’ve done to other organizations such as HELP USA.

**MCC:** We agree that the most effective way to revitalize communities is by bringing the investment of private and public sectors together to create needed housing and services. How have your fans and the communities you have contributed to responded?

**JBJ:** Having the opportunity to give back in a meaningful way is the greatest thing I can share with anyone. It doesn’t need to be measured in dollars to have meaning. Volunteering in your community for a cause that moves you has true lasting meaning and is more rewarding than just about anything you can do. And then, when you meet someone like Sister Mary or yourself, Maria, with all you and your family have done with HELP USA, it’s inspiring.

**MCC:** By your example and reminding us all that “Volunteerism is hip,” hopefully more people will become aware of these issues and try to get personally involved. There are so many ways for children and adults to help in their own communities by organizing supply and clothing drives for local shelters or giving personal time by hosting a recreational activity, serving meals, and sharing special skills.



**JBJ:** In this day and age of technology and the Internet, you can find little pieces of the puzzle that help to make the piece a whole. If you don’t have the time to go down to Louisiana, for example, to help on a build, you could do something as simple as locating a grassroots organization, like the Angel Network, which is Oprah’s charitable arm, that you can help. If you wanted to just donate the placemats for one of the twenty-eight houses that we built, that truly would make a difference and be appreciated.

**MCC:** With our country’s wealth, technology, and resources, it seems unfathomable that the number of sheltered and unsheltered homeless in urban and rural areas across the country is increasing. We know that in addition to contributing factors such as mental illness, chronic substance abuse, and domestic violence, lack of employment and livable income are the major causes of this growing population. We need more than bricks and mortar to address these issues.

**JBJ:** I agree. This isn’t anything other than a social issue. It’s not a disease. This is something that we, the collective we, can really take hold of and make a difference. I don’t have to be a scientist or pray for that scientist to develop the cure. The cure is here—it is in our education, money, effort, and desire. We can help educate. We can help build. All it takes is that power of We...

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