

# THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

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## The Executive Profile: Tom Collishaw

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# TOM COLLISHAW

PRESIDENT AND CEO | SELF-HELP ENTERPRISES (SHE)

EDUCATION: B.A., COLGATE UNIVERSITY; ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE PROGRAM,  
HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT | AGE: 67 | FAMILY: WIFE SUZANNE,  
THREE CHILDREN, FIVE GRANDCHILDREN



### What we do:

Self-Help Enterprises is a nationally recognized community development organization whose mission is to work together with low-income families to build and sustain healthy homes and communities. Our service area is comprised of nine counties — Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tulare.

### What are your roots in the Central Valley?

Although I didn't grow up in the Central Valley, I've spent most of my professional life here, arriving in 1980 as a VISTA Volunteer assigned to Self-Help Enterprises. After growing up in northern New Jersey, the Valley has truly become home, as I married into my wife's local family in 1987. I've built deep relationships with local leaders, families, and partners who share the SHE values of opportunity, dignity, and community.

### Tell us more about how you came to Self-Help Enterprises.

I signed up to be a VISTA Volunteer (Volunteers in Service to America) fresh out of college, looking to help the working poor get a hand up. Immediately upon arrival in Visalia, I became inspired by the SHE mission to help working families build their own homes through sweat equity. I quickly realized that housing was about much more than construction; it is about empowerment, economic independence and mobility, and sustainability. Over the years, I have worked in nearly every area of the organization, including self-help construction, loan processing and housing counseling, real estate development, community infrastructure, and policy development. I became Deputy Director in 1993, and later Vice President and Director of Development in 2005. In 2014 was honored to be named President and CEO.

**Tell us about your current position.**

As President and CEO, I oversee all operations of SHE's community work, from our signature mutual self-help housing program to affordable rental housing, community infrastructure development, disaster response and recovery, and homeownership programs. Our team of nearly 240 employees serves nine counties: all eight counties of the San Joaquin Valley (from Stockton to Bakersfield), as well as Mariposa County. I feel fortunate to work alongside a group of people who care deeply about enabling families to thrive. As a nonprofit organization, I answer to a volunteer board of directors that are diverse in background and geography, with active members from Modesto to Bakersfield.

**What is it like working for a housing developer at a time with so much housing uncertainty?**

It's both challenging and motivating. The housing crisis in California is complex, but it also highlights the essential nature of our work. We see every day how the lack of affordable housing affects low-income families, farmworkers, and whole communities, and we are uniquely positioned to be part of the solution. Even in uncertain times, we continue to grow and innovate, developing new financing models and strengthening partnerships to meet the changing needs of the Valley.

**How would you describe Self-Helps' role in the Central Valley?**

We see ourselves as a catalyst for opportunity. Since 1965, more than 6,700 families have built their own homes through our self-help housing model, and we have developed over 3,100 affordable rental units that we own and operate. Beyond housing, we help residents access safe drinking water, build resilience to drought and disasters, and strengthen communities by empowering people to take control of their future. We are deeply rooted in the Valley and committed to building and sustaining healthy homes and communities.

**What has been your favorite part of working for Self-Help?**

There is something tangible about building things that become community assets, things you can see, touch and feel. That is part of what has always appealed to me about SHE – we build stuff.

**What are some of the challenges you have faced so far in your career?**

The work we do is deeply fulfilling but never easy. Affordable housing development involves navigating complex funding systems, changing regulations, and constant economic shifts and market disruptions. The biggest challenge, and the greatest motivator, is that the need always exceeds the resources available. That's why advocacy and partnerships are so important. Overcoming those barriers requires persistence, creativity, and collaboration at every level.

**What was your very first job, and what did you learn from it?**

Newspaper delivery boy. It taught me that when people depend upon you, there is only one choice, regardless of the challenges you face. That is, to show up and deliver.

**Any hobbies outside of work?**

Reading, travel, music, and cooking comfort food.