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success stories

TAOS COUNTY AND THE MORENO VALLEY

Habitat for Humanity:

Where dreams become reality

By Sandy Penny

Every Habitat home is a success story about a family in dire need.

"When a family is selected to own a home, they feel like they've won the lottery," says Paul Hesch, executive director for Taos County Habitat.

When the keys are handed to the owners, a dream becomes a reality. One little boy recently took Hesch by the hand, led him through the house and proudly exclaimed, "This is MY room!" There wasn't even a wall yet.

Habitat families include various ethnic backgrounds and personal challenges. House 25, scheduled for a spring 2009 move-in, is being built to accommodate a single mother and her daughter who has special needs and significant physical challenges. Hesch says, "It's difficult to do it all on a shoestring, but it's worth the effort."

Habitat homes are built almost completely by volunteers and paid for with donations. A small, dedicated management, fundraising and part-time office staff operates on a slim budget. On site, there is one paid supervisor who instructs and manages volunteers and paid subcontractors who do jobs that require special training and certifications. Volunteers show up from all over the world to do everything from breaking ground to finishing touches. They mix cement, dig ditches, lay bricks, peel vigas, raise and paint walls, and install insulation, cabinets and appliances. Workers get acquainted with New Mexico's adobe homes and unique climate and terrain challenges.

Sixteen students from Blake High School in Minneapolis worked on houses 24 and 25 during spring break. With seven years of working on Habitat homes as part of their service learning curriculum, this was their first time in Taos. Volunteers learn about the geography, construction processes and building costs. They are exposed to local culture and learn how much they can help a needy family with a little time and effort.

"Roger, the foreman, is our hero," said group leader Julie Rogers Bascom. "He shows the kids what to do, and then trusts them to do it. It's such a confidence builder."

Habitat for Humanity International volunteer groups, Collegiate Challenge and Global Village, continue to bring in willing workers, Hesch said. "Everyone can do something, and not everyone has to work onsite. We need public relations help, office assistants, fund raisers, event workers, and even people who bring goodies to the worksite to show appreciation for volunteers."

Grant writer Bruce Armstrong added, "Right now, we're looking for volunteer architects, engineers and those with green design and construction expertise for a Taos green development." Habitat hopes to offer 13 "self-help" homes where families build each other's houses all at once, with volunteer support. The dream includes a community center with a shared office and meeting room. There may be lease space for businesses like a daycare, an industrial kitchen, or café. A communal library, recreation space, kitchen and eating area could offset smaller home sizes and enhance economic opportunities for the whole community.

If everything goes well, Habitat will hold two design competitions and a discussion series to help determine the green systems. Other plans include trying to fund green-housing rehabilitation and breaking ground on the first Habitat home in Questa.

"We are truly grateful to all our volunteers and contributors, locally and worldwide," Hesch said. "Taos has provided tremendous support during the past 12 years, but the need for Taos Habitat housing is great and we could use more local participation."

Habitat Taos is rebuilding contributions, local volunteerism and service organization participation that waned in the last few years. Donations can include money, property and materials for building, as well as new and gently used items to be sold at the Restore. The Restore can use just about anything except clothing, and anyone can shop or donate.

Habitat would also like to build monthly pledges of money and time — a Habitat Habit. Next time you're wondering how to make a difference, stop by the Habitat project behind the Taos Youth and Family Center and just do what you can.

Habitat Habit:
make a monthly pledge of time or money to support building more homes. Just $10 a month can help change lives.

Girls with power tools: Blake High School girls sand boards for Habitat house 25.

Habitat volunteers come from all walks of life and all ages and skill levels.

Blake High School volunteers raise an interior wall during spring break.

Habitat thanks Century 21 Success for helping to make this story possible.

Habitat's mobile tool shed has just about everything needed to build a home.

at a glance

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Habitat Restore
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Hours: Mon. through Sat., 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
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