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Habitat houses a labor of love

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Board by board, nail by nail, Lettie Esparza's dream house became reality on an after-thought lot in the old section of Carpentersville.

And it did so, thanks to a handful of dedicated volunteers who logged eight-hour days most every week since construction began in April.

"I call them my Wednesday regulars," said Connie Kitzinger, volunteer coordinator with Elgin-based Northern Fox Valley Habitat for Humanity. "We would be lost without them. They have probably put in hundreds of hours."

Scott Grafer, 43, a Huntley resident and co-owner of Curb Appeal Homes in town, signed on after seeing a notice in the St. Mary Catholic Church bulletin.

"They were looking for a project manager to remodel an existing home," said Grafer, whose company specializes in remodeling.

"Then they decided, instead, to build a new home... My whole crew came out to work on it for the initial framing and then every Saturday."

That team included co-owner and business partner Jaine Lopez of Crystal Lake and carpenters Phil Wright of Algonquin and Dennis Yurik of Roselle.

"My guys did the precision work, layout and measuring," Grafer said. "We literally took our business process and broke it down into super finite elements ... Our plan was to teach them (volunteers) how to do it and then get out of the way."

Committed volunteers

Grafer was surprised by the level of commitment, despite the time required to first level the site and then wait for professionals to complete the foundation.

Building codes also require licensed plumbers and electricians, but Grafer

estimated 90 percent of the work was done by relatively raw rookies.

"The biggest thing I learned was how really dedicated - and enthusiastic - all of the volunteers are," he said. "They get mad at you if they are standing around for more than 10 minutes."

Kitzinger estimated about 390 people worked at one time or another at the Skyline Drive job site.

A majority of those came one day, perhaps part of a Saturday church work day. But there also was a core group led by new Huntley resident Tom Schneider.

"I've always had an interest in doing this," said Schneider, 56, a former dean of students at Buffalo Grove High School. "After I retired, I wanted to get involved with Habitat."

Schneider, who used to help his father do sheet metal work, confessed a lifelong interest in the trades. But he had no idea on the breath and scope required to build a house from scratch until he signed on with Habitat after retiring in June 2005.

Hours of planning and work

It takes hours of planning, cutting, fitting and re-fitting to build even the simplest of homes. Fortunately, there is enough friendly banter, jokes, coffee and doughnuts to lighten the load.

The 1,380-square-foot ranch at 163 Skyline Drive does offer atypical amenities. Outside walls are made of two-by-sixes rather than two-by-fours, to allow for more insulation. Oversized windows allow for natural light, and there are 42-inch-tall wall cabinets, laminate floors, vinyl shakes on the gable and 9-foot ceilings.

Grafer even designed a sloped "trey" ceiling in the living room.

"When you have free labor you can do all kinds of incremental things," Grafer said. "We took a lot of ideas and things we normally do on more expensive homes and used them here."

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Northern Fox Valley Habitat for Humanity does its best to cap construction for each house at about \$120,000 - in this case, \$40,000 for the lot and \$80,000 for materials.

Kitzinger said her Habitat chapter's preference to build new rather than remodel has advantages, even though finding affordable lots is becoming increasingly difficult.

"It's a matter of finances and - quite frankly - land availability," she said. "Most existing houses you can't touch for less than \$90,000. Also, with a rehab, you never know what you're going to get into until you pull the wall out."

Habitat requires qualifying homeowners to log a minimum of 250 hours of

"sweat equity" in their house. The idea is to give them a greater stake in the process and it aid in building rapport with their neighbors.

"Lettie has been out there from day one," Grafer said. "She has a house now that she's not going to have to do much to, and that's good since they don't have a lot of money to do upkeep."

The single mother, who was unavailable for comment, is expecting a second child any day. The dedication ceremony was Dec. 10 and she likely will close on the house in mid-January.

It will culminate a nine-months odyssey.

Dick Tabbat, 68, formerly of Park Ridge now living in Huntley, began working on Habitat homes four years ago in Arizona. A salesman by trade, he had to learn everything from the ground up. Fortunately, he has good teachers like retired engineer Bill Dysart of Crystal Lake.

The 77-year-old self-proclaimed do-it-yourselfer has been a Habitat volunteer for a decade. And the overwhelming reason Dysart and others buy their own tools and wield them for the cause, is to help others.

"After retiring from Motorola I decided to spend the rest of life doing volunteer work," said Tom Mullen, 73, of Crystal Lake. "You feel good about doing it; knowing that some person who would never would be able to afford a mortgage has a new house."

Newcomer Dennis Finney agreed.

"When you're working 60 hours a week you don't have time for this kind of thing. Now I do and I'm glad," said Finney, 54, of Wayne. "It's good for your soul, your heart."

You can help

Since opening in 1990, Habitat for Humanity of Northern Fox Valley has built 44 homes in Elgin, St. Charles and Carpentersville - housing 160 family members. For information or to volunteer, call (847) 836-1432 or visit www.hfhfv.org.

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