

Wichita Eagle, The (KS)

June 20, 2006

Section: LOCAL & STATE

Edition: main

Page: 1B

HOME SWEAT HOME

HABITAT BLITZ BUILDS FOUR NEW HOUSES

JILLIAN COHAN, The Wichita Eagle

Her legs nearly gave out after a day of hanging wallboard and hammering shingles, coupled with an overnight shift at the bakery where she works. But somehow Rebecca Roberts found herself atop a roof again Monday afternoon, her eyes shaded by a safety helmet with a sticker that said "Roofing Goddess."

"The minute I get out here, it feels like I just got out of bed," said Roberts, a single mother of five who will soon live in one of four Habitat for Humanity houses in north Wichita.

Her house is part of a Blitz Build that began Friday and will end Saturday with a dedication ceremony.

For five years, Roberts and her kids crowded into her mother's three-bedroom house on the east side. Before that, they lived in rentals or mobile homes. Her credit wasn't good, so she figured Habitat was a long shot. But she wanted her kids to have a home of their own.

When her 10-year-old daughter first saw the floor laid out, she said, "'Mama, it sure isn't very big,' " Roberts recalled. "I said 'No, but it's going to be ours. We don't need a mansion.' "

While Roberts rested in the shade of a tent on the job site, her daughter, Torie, raced by, dripping wet.

"Wiley did it!" she said, pointing toward the Roberts' future neighbor, Wiley Samuel, who quickly closed a water cooler.

The four families who will live here, at 32nd and Arkansas, didn't know each other when the project started. Now, Rebecca can tell you about Wiley and LaDonna's two sons, and their baby on the way. Jeff and Stacy Luthy will live next door to them, with their two kids. At the end of the row, single dad Sergio Hernandez and his three boys will occupy the lot closest to the street.

"That's 13 children this is going to be a decent home for," said Linda Stewart, executive director of Wichita's Habitat chapter, gesturing across the muddy work site.

ICM, a Colwich-based ethanol maker, sponsored two of the homes; insurance company Hilb Rogal and Hobbs sponsored the third; and the fourth is a joint project of Cargill Cares and Slumberland Furniture.

The houses were little more than empty lots a few days ago, when rain delayed the construction. But after two days of work, the buildings have taken shape.

On Monday about 100 volunteers - some from the site sponsors and about 50 from Blitz Home Builders, a national group that volunteers at Habitat sites across the country - were busy tarpapering roofs, taping off windows and installing siding on the homes.

"A project like this has a lot of attention and focus," said crew leader Roy Zaborowski, a Blitz builder from Phoenix, Ariz.

"Sometimes people have concerns about having a Habitat House in their backyard. It's a silly fear to have, but a job like this goes a long way to allaying it."

One of the things that helps, Zaborowski, said, is that "people can see the quality of the homes being built and the quality of people who are moving in."

All of the families have contributed at least 400 hours of work on Habitat sites, attended classes on budgeting and saved to make their mortgage payments. Some, like Wiley Samuel, have worked more than the required hours and donated the extra sweat equity to families who need a boost.

"Not one of us out here is destitute," Rebecca Roberts said.

"Almost anybody can go to a bank, get a loan and have builders do this. It means a whole lot more to build it yourself."

She paused for a moment, turning her safety helmet in her hands.

"It's wonderful," the roofing goddess said. "I can't say more than that without bawling my head off."

Reach Jillian Cohan at 316-268-6524 or jcohan@wichitaeagle.com.

IF YOU GO

Habitat for Humanity dedication

What: Ribbon-cutting and dedication ceremony for the four houses built during this week's Blitz Build, followed by tours of the homes

Where: 32nd and Arkansas

When: 10 a.m. Saturday

Wichita Habitat for Humanity is taking applications for new homeowners and for volunteers. For more information about Habitat housing, call 316-269-0755. For volunteer information, call 316-619-2405.

Illustration:PHOTO