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Habitat for Humanity building 7 new houses in south Wichita

By Sarah Rajewski
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A family steps up to the front door of a new house. After cutting a ribbon, they put a key in the lock and turn it, opening the door of their home.

This scene is something Linda Stewart, executive director of Habitat for Humanity, likes to call "the moment."

On June 26, seven more families will get to experience this moment as a conclusion to Wonder Week 2010. The week kicks off construction in Habitat's South Village at 44th South and Victoria, one block west of Hydraulic.

On Thursday, crews started building seven houses scheduled to be finished in eight days. One of the houses will belong to Nancy Lerma and her family.

Lerma's 5-year-old daughter, Sophia, is the most excited member of the family, her mom said. She's already picked out her room colors: red and purple, her favorites.

"She asks me every day, 'How is the house?' and I just tell her, 'Wait. We need to start building it,'" Lerma said.

Lerma was at the build site Thursday, putting in some of her "sweat equity" hours, which are required for all Habitat families. As walls were going up all over the site, she said the progress of the houses had surprised her.

"I thought it was kind of impossible, but now it's pretty amazing to see all the people working together," Lerma said.

As the noise of hammers sounded across the site, teams of volunteers focused on their assigned houses. Stewart said volunteers will work more than 3,800 four-hour shifts to complete the houses.

Many local volunteers and people from sponsoring organizations were at work, along with the Blitz Home Builders, a group with members from across the U.S. The group chose Wichita as the site for its annual build, returning after assisting in Wonder Week 2006.

Roy Zaborowski, chairman of the group, said he travels from Phoenix for building events because they provide people with the houses they should have.

"These are not people that are somehow second-rate citizens," he said. "They deserve to have the opportunity to buy a house, just like everyone else. That's not some kind of privilege that only a few can have."

Jake Trease and other youths from Derby's First Christian Church were also working on one of the houses at the site. After deciding as a small group to do something for the community, the teens began selling hot chocolate to church members for 75 cents. Later, they conducted other fundraisers, eventually raising \$10,000 for Habitat.

Trease said the construction of one house can be life-changing for the owner.

"It's just really cool how fast it can happen," he said.

For Courtney Chambers, a single mother of two, the fact that she is about to own a home has not quite sunk in. Chambers said she is looking forward to having a yard where her children can play and rooms for each of them, but the whole thing does not seem real yet.

"I've thought about this for so long, and it's here, but I don't think it's hit me yet," she said.

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