

NFL scores high in a home rehab project Volunteers help fix up 3 City Heights houses

Susan Gembrowski; The San Diego Union - Tribune; Jan 25, 2003; pg. B.1;

Morten Blakeston doesn't particularly like football, but he's a Super Bowl fan now that National Football League and other volunteers helped fix up his City Heights home.

"It's like old America, where neighbors helped each other with a barn raising," the 68-year-old self-described urban farmer said. "They're angels from heaven."

Blakeston got a new roof, central heat and new paint inside and out in a home refurbishment where the NFL teamed with Rebuilding Together, formerly Christmas in April.

The house fix-ups are an eight-year tradition in Super Bowl host cities, but Rebuilding Together has been around for two decades doing such projects all year long in low-income neighborhoods nationwide.

Yesterday morning, Chargers wide receiver Terry Charles lifted concrete fragments from Blakeston's driveway into a wheelbarrow.

Chandler Tagliabue, NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue's wife, scraped stickers off kitchen walls in the house.

Susie Spanos, daughter-in-law of Chargers owner Alex Spanos, climbed a ladder to remove an old window blind.

"Guess we need to cover the fridge," Tagliabue said, as she wrapped Blakeston's kitchen in plastic for the repainting.

She grabbed one end of a small, white table and Blakeston picked up the other as volunteers worked to clear out the tiny kitchen.

"Oh, you should see his back yard. It's very special," Tagliabue said.

And indeed it is.

Blakeston grows organic vegetables in the canyon leading from his back porch. He has fig, orange, macadamia and pecan trees. He'll offer a visitor mint tea or an avocado smoothie from ingredients he raises himself.

Blakeston's front yard was completely obliterated by overgrown trees and bushes until yesterday, when volunteers removed a stand of bamboo from his front door and laid a brick path to his new screen door.

"I kind of liked it that way, but I told them to do it whatever way they liked," he said of his newly shorn yard.

Next door, Blakeston's neighbor Susana Hernandez was getting a revamp of her own from Team NFL/Rebuilding Together. Hernandez works seven days a week, cleaning a nearby private school and two homes each day.

"I helped people keep up their houses, but I could not keep up my own," said the single mom of four.

Hernandez celebrated her 40th birthday Thursday. This was the best present ever, she said.

Since it began, Rebuilding Together has refurbished more than 8,000 homes and nonprofit facilities in 865 cities and towns across the United States. More than 255,000 volunteers nationwide have given their time. There are 260 affiliates in all 50 states, including in San Diego and National City, that have created \$84 million in market value through their rehab work. The project in City Heights had an \$80,000 price tag, with donations from building contractors, suppliers and other companies.

At yesterday's event, Kaiser Permanente contributed \$100,000 to the organization and Alex Spanos gave \$50,000.

There were so many volunteers yesterday that another neighbor, Holly Peterson, got her home repainted, too.

The Tagliabues started out as volunteers 20 years ago, Chandler Tagliabue said, when her husband was a lawyer in Washington, D.C., and long before he became NFL commissioner.

"It's the whole idea of helping people who live in your city," she said.

Sherry Robinet of San Diego's Rebuilding Together and Jose Lopez of the Fox Canyon Neighborhood Association and a neighbor of Blakeston and Hernandez agree.

"If you let one house go blighted, immediately blight begins to spread," Lopez said. "But, as one house gets fixed, guess what? We kind of get ashamed of ourselves and say, 'I'm going to mow my lawn. I'm making repairs to my house.' It's contagious."

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