

Can't help but help | Charitable organizations lend a hand to needy homeowners

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Bedridden for more than a decade with rheumatoid arthritis, Sherry Fiala hasn't left the confines of her El Cajon home for eight years. But soon she will have no choice but to move out -- at least temporarily -- because of the insidious mold that has blackened her walls and ceilings and caused mushrooms to sprout inside.

Thanks to the charitable contributions of a construction company, mold and asbestos remediators, and a major home builder, Fiala and her son will soon have a completely refurbished, mold-free house filled with new model-home furniture.

Call it the San Diego version of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," the ABC reality show that dramatically transforms the houses of hard-luck families.

Come this Saturday, 16 San Diego County homeowners, along with hundreds more across the country, will be the beneficiaries of a major reconstruction effort sponsored by Rebuilding Together, a volunteer home rehabilitation organization.

After sifting through the compelling stories of 70 local households, the San Diego affiliate of Rebuilding Together chose 16 needy families who will get home renovation help from hundreds of volunteers.

From San Marcos to Logan Heights to El Cajon, volunteer laborers will repaint houses, renovate kitchens, replace aging appliances, repair electrical problems and install wheelchair ramps.

As needy as all 16 homeowners are, the stories don't get much more compelling than Sherry Fiala's. Diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis 16 years ago, Fiala survives on just \$1,100 a month in spousal support, half of which goes toward her mortgage. Her son Shawn, who copes daily with a rare autoimmune disorder, has cared for his mother since he was 13. His father left Fiala shortly after her diagnosis.

Financially strapped, Fiala has had to defer desperately needed home repairs and, as her porous roof sprouted more leaks, the mold continued to grow to the point where parts of the home are uninhabitable.

To the rescue

Enter Jackalope Inc., an East County charitable organization that is covering the cost to replace Fiala's roof and clean up her yard, and Rebuilding Together, which is overseeing a major rehab of the house, including mold removal, all new drywall, a new kitchen, bathroom and flooring.

It is, said Fiala, the answer to her prayers.

"I am a woman of faith, and we have suffered a lot in every way, but I believe there was a divine hand in this because I persevered in finding someone to just keep the rain from coming in through the roof, and at first, I kept getting turned down," said Fiala.

"Naturally, it was a shock and disbelief at first that this is happening, but I have some very devout friends praying diligently for this to happen for us, and now it has. We just never could have imagined this happening."

Though Fiala's house is probably the most daunting project Rebuilding Together is tackling, it would have been unthinkable not to have taken it on, said Pamela Thorsch, executive director of the San Diego nonprofit. To have done the project without the donated labor and materials would have cost at least \$200,000, Thorsch estimates.

Because of the magnitude of the work involved, the entire renovation will probably not be completed for at least four to five months from now. The first step will be the mold remediation work, which will be done without charge by American Technologies Inc.

"These are people who are financially impoverished and on fixed incomes who no longer have the ability financially to care for their homes," she said. "They are choosing between food and medicine and a leaking pipe."

It was not always easy to decide who would get her organization's help and who would not, added Thorsch.

"We had applicants with enormous problems and issues. You want to help everybody but there are various needs," she explained "Sometimes all someone needs is changing out a light fixture, but I personally meet everyone. As I say, I have people who can't even afford food, so we have to draw the line."

Heartbreaking

She recalls vividly her first encounter with an elderly Logan Heights man who was grasping a screwdriver in one hand and a fire extinguisher in the other while the electrical outlets in his house were all sparking. He no longer had any hot water, and the man was using an old 18-inch gas stove to heat his home.

Because of the immediate danger, Thorsch was able to get the electrical workers union to send out a crew to rewire the house, and Walter Anderson Plumbing volunteered to install a new water heater and toilet.

Norman Casserley, the homeowner, acknowledged the danger of using his gas stove as a heat source.

"The oven makes me sleepy, and I'm afraid I won't wake up sometimes," said Casserley, 78, who was born in the small three- bedroom home he has owned since the 1970s. "This has saved my life. I found out about Pamela and her group in the newspaper a year ago and I applied. It's just improved my whole life, especially with the terrible hazard of fire in the house that I had."

Turner Construction Co., which sits on Rebuilding Together's board, has agreed to renovate the interior of Casserley's home, a project that will include recarpeting, as well as a brand new kitchen.

Each home selected for the Saturday rebuilding effort has its own sponsor, who pays a fee of \$3,000. That money is used to leverage a multitude of in-kind contributions from those in the building trades, as well as a variety of merchants, such as Home Depot. In addition, The San Diego Burn Institute has donated smoke detectors and fire extinguishers for each of the homes, and E-Trade Financial has agreed to contribute \$103,000 to underwrite a year-round rebuilding program that helps needy homeowners with smaller scale home improvements.

Although many of the projects undertaken Saturday have required some advance prep work, most of the rehab jobs should be completed that day when more than 1,000 volunteers will mobilize for the rebuilding effort.

Among those volunteering as sponsors are several construction companies and contractors, Rotary clubs, the San Diego Association of Realtors, some financial institutions, and the county's Department of Aging and Independent Services, said Thorsch.

Construction company owner Jeff Jertberg, more accustomed to showy bathroom and kitchen remodels than basic home improvement jobs, said he loves the idea of being able to help people who are too impoverished to tackle long-deferred maintenance projects.

"We've got these skills, and we can positively affect the lives of these people," said Jertberg, owner of VanBerg Construction, who has participated in previous years. "So just a little work on our part makes a huge difference in their lives. There are already a lot of great people doing things in places like Mexico and Africa but there are a lot of opportunities to help people in San Diego, too."

No doubt, though, the Fialas' residence will be an especially challenging re-do, Jertberg acknowledged.

"It's basically a gut of a house and then you put it back together," he added. "This isn't like Ty (Pennington) and his guys on 'Extreme Makeover.' Those guys knock it out in a week. That's not the case here."

Thorsch said she was particularly moved by the case of a San Marcos woman, who at one time was an assembly line worker in the electrical industry and now lives on a fixed income. A homeowner for 30 years, she only has a partial roof, her floors are all concrete, and she has no furniture except for an old king-size bed with the mattress springs popping out. She shares her home with three cats and a dog and also has three goats and four chickens."

As part of the Rebuilding Together event, she will get new flooring, some appliances and furnishings from KB Home, which is donating furniture from three of its model homes -- enough to furnish seven of the 16 Rebuilding Together houses.

"When we went to visit her, the woman apologized because she had no furniture to sit on. I actually had tears in my eyes," said Thorsch. "We live in this pristine community and how many people know that people live like this."

How to help

Rebuilding Together still is in need of several donated items, including beds, water heaters and stoves, to complete the home renovation effort slated for Saturday.

To see the organization's wish list, go to the following link on the Internet:
www.rebuildingtogethersd.org/donate/wishlist.cfm.

In addition, there are still some items needed for the Fiala home project, including kitchen and bathroom cabinets and appliances. The nonprofit organization is also seeking help from roofers to help patch or replace roofs on some of the homes.

To apply for future assistance from Rebuilding Together, go to www.rebuildingtogethersd.org/apply/recipients.cfm. To qualify, homeowners must be low income and currently own and occupy their home. For more information, call executive director Pamela Thorsch at (619) 280-0251