

Volunteers help victim of drive-by rebuild life, house

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Caesar Lopez watched with amazement from his wheelchair yesterday as an army of volunteers painted his childhood home, planted trees in what had been a junk-ridden back yard, and put the final touches on a project that will change his life.

Nearly a year ago, Lopez was the unintended victim of an unsolved drive-by shooting in front of his Una Street residence on the border of Southcrest and Shelltown. He was hit four times in the neck and back, leaving him with limited use of his arms and hands and unable to walk.

After eight months in the hospital, he returned home in February, only to find he couldn't maneuver his wheelchair through narrow hallways and doorways, navigate stairs or even step into the bathtub. He became something of a prisoner in the house, making his tragic situation even harder.

But 65 volunteers from the ladies' softball, volleyball and basketball teams at Mesa College, joined by workers from construction companies, changed all that yesterday, making the house wheelchair-friendly and new with old-fashioned elbow grease.

Companies donated plumbing and electrical work, cabinetry, paint, wrought-iron fencing, concrete for a patio slab and retaining wall, carpentry for widening doors, kitchen appliances, carpeting and linoleum flooring, plus the labor that started about two weeks ago.

The same transformation was happening elsewhere in the city at the homes of 25 other low-income families and two women's shelters. About 1,300 unskilled and union volunteers took part in an annual project sponsored by Rebuilding Together San Diego.

Now, Lopez can roll up to the kitchen sink and do the dishes. He can roll into his own shower. He can roll down the ramp onto his new patio. He has room to do 360-degree turns in the bathroom. He can enjoy backyard barbecues because a new concrete ramp leads him to a beautifully landscaped patio area.

"I can go in my yard and be in the sun," said Lopez, who previously could only wheel out to an alley to be outdoors. "I'm just really grateful that people are taking the time to help us."

He didn't know it yesterday morning, but the Mesa College volunteers had raised enough money to buy the family a new barbecue and outdoor furniture. They planned to show him at the end of the day, when everything was finished.

"It gets our team out into the community and lets them see how lucky they truly are," said Mesa women's volleyball coach Kim Lester. "It's great for them. The team gets a lot out of it. It's team bonding."

As Lester spoke, her paint-spattered players laughed with one another while enthusiastically pushing paint rollers, giving the walls a second coat of white.

The Lopezes got another surprise yesterday: Granada Hills, a group home for adults with disabilities, donated a fully equipped van with wheelchair modifications so Lopez can get around.

The volunteers seemed as delighted as the Lopez family. "This gives us a chance to give back," said Chip Hastie, project coordinator for the Lopez home. "We get a lot out of it." Hastie works for Clark Construction, which is helping build the new downtown Padres ballpark.

Among other companies who donated to the Lopez project: A.O. Reed & Co. Inc., Clark Steel Fabricators, Pacific Architectural Millwork, DW McCasland Inc., Morley Construction, Cross Painting, Spectra Contract Flooring, KHS&S Contractors and Morrow-Meadows Corp.

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