

I love what they've done with the place, Nonprofit stages annual home-renovation drive

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SAN DIEGO -- Mildred Malone looked slightly bewildered yesterday as 30 volunteers warmed through her one-story home, installing new light fixtures and cabinets while painting the walls and exterior.

"They put a new stove inside," the longtime Sherman Heights resident said as she watched from beneath a canopy outside. "There were so many things that needed to be done. I'm so grateful, and it's almost like a party going on. The house was always a happy place."

Malone's dwelling was part of a one-day home-renovation drive led by Rebuilding Together San Diego. Hundreds of volunteers painted, plumbed, rewired and hauled away clutter at 10 homes around the county. Most are owned by elderly or disabled people.

"This is our annual event," said Pamela Thorsch, executive director of the nonprofit organization. "This is the largest of our efforts, but we do things throughout the year."

She described yesterday's renovation blitz as a "mammoth" undertaking.

"We have over 1,000 volunteers and hundreds of thousands of dollars in market value that have gone into this effort," Thorsch said. "There are numerous corporate sponsors that bring their bighearted employees, along with volunteers from the building trades."

Participants included title sponsor LPL Financial Services, Turner Construction, the San Diego Association of Realtors, Wachovia Bank, AARP and the Design Institute of San Diego. In addition to improving houses, teams did renovations at the Ocean Beach fire station and the Copley YMCA.

Rebuilding Together, which has been operating in San Diego for about 12 years, selects projects based on need and household income, Thorsch said. There are 240 affiliates nationwide.

At the Malone home, architect Rick Clark supervised efforts. The structure, which has a covered porch and bay windows, was built in the 1920s, he said. Signs outside proclaimed the participation of the Rotary Clubs of La Jolla Golden Triangle and La Jolla New Generation.

Clark said the repair of Malone's home coincided with Rotarians at Work Day. That effort yesterday involved community improvement projects in San Diego and Imperial counties and Baja California.

Malone, 73, raised three children in the modest house, two doors from Villa Montezuma, a historic 1887 mansion. She said she supported her family alone by working as a teaching aide and as a cook. Malone, now retired, became a homeowner about 40 years ago.

Across town in Linda Vista, about 30 volunteers removed clutter from the home of Gail and Brooks Russell. The couple live there with three grandchildren.

Brooks Russell said he and his wife were cited by the city for storing "stuff that was an eyesore" in their yard. They were referred to Rebuilding Together.

Yesterday, volunteers helped sort through objects that included a large portrait of Elvis Presley; mattresses; a crankshaft; chests of drawers; a bookcase; and a tool chest. The rebuilding team also performed plumbing and electrical work.

"They are bringing it up to code," Gail Russell said.

Back in Sherman Heights, Malone said she was pleased as she watched her home undergo its transformation.

"I think it was just God's blessing," she said, adding that her goal is simply to live in the home "as long as possible."