

Volunteers Fix Up Homes, Brighten Yards With Plants

Cheryl Clark: San Diego Union-Tribune; August 5, 2007

SAN DIEGO -- Diana Flores of Logan Heights watched yesterday as dozens of volunteers painted the shingles of her 87-year-old home, rewired electricity and repaired the plumbing.

They rebuilt the porch, tore down a wobbly, old fence, raked away dead grass and trash, and planted shrubs. Also, 170 volunteers worked on some of her neighbors' buildings on Imperial Avenue.

The work started last week, and it was all for free.

"This is such a blessing," Flores said, amazed at all the activity.

Still recovering from a car accident she was in a year ago, Flores, a certified nursing assistant, has been unable to do the work her home needed.

Organizers of Rebuilding Together San Diego selected her cottage and several other homes and businesses along Imperial Avenue between 22nd and 25th streets for the effort. It is the latest in a series of 45 projects so far this year to renovate low-income communities.

Later in the day at the other end of Imperial Avenue in Encanto, families and friends gathered for food, music, pony rides, award presentations and a salute to diversity at the second annual Imperial Fest between 62nd and 68th streets. The event was sponsored by the Walter Porter Educational and Community Foundation.

Lakeisha George, 7, enjoyed what she called "the frog ride" because "we went all the way up, and it made me feel like I was falling." Her friend, Selena Silva, 9, said she got to ride Patches, a multicolored pony.

"We just came over to show support," said Jacqueline Kennedy, 21, a sociology student at University of California San Diego.

Alea Bennett, 8, got to perform with her friends in the hip-hop dance group, Something Creative.

"We danced to songs by Justin Timberlake," Alea said proudly.

Back in Logan Heights at the building renovation project, numerous San Diego businesses such as landscapers, a plumber, a lending institution, media groups as well as the AARP joined in with a flurry of rakes, pickaxes, paintbrushes and hammers.

The home of Carmen Armenta, 72, also got help from strong arms that replaced the linoleum floor that her late husband installed in her kitchen and dining room 32 years ago.

"It was cracked and broken," Armenta said.

Last year, Rebuilding Together painted her house, she said.

Ramona Rodriguez, who has lived in her Imperial Avenue house for 35 years, watched landscapers plant bright magenta and yellow lantana or bougainvillea along the sidewalk.

Executive director Pamela Thorsch said the four-block area chosen for renovation along Imperial Avenue "has such a rich, culturally diverse community, with homes that are historic. Many are almost 100 years old."

Regrettably, she said, redevelopment efforts have been lax.

Many homes sit adjacent to businesses. Flores' home is next to a tire shop.

Councilman Ben Hueso acknowledged all the work that the neighborhoods along Imperial Avenue need. But Hueso seemed proud of the number of volunteers who came to help his district.

"Lots of times it's hard to improve old homes and businesses -- there's sometimes extensive amount of work required," Hueso said. "But sometimes, just doing a simple thing, like planting trees or plants, can make people feel better about their neighborhoods."