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BUILD THE BORDER

Two Texas Habitat for Humanity affiliates dedicate time, treasure to building up border communities

FORT WORTH—Two Texas Habitat for Humanity affiliates are pioneering a program, Build the Border, that is building homes and hope in Matamoros, Mexico.

In little more than a year, Trinity Habitat for Humanity, based in Fort Worth, and Houston Habitat for Humanity have sent funds equivalent to the cost to build nearly 10 homes in Matamoros. Trinity Habitat also sends teams of volunteers to build houses with the Tamaulipas Habitat for Humanity affiliate there.

Build the Border is a product of Habitat for Humanity's tithe, or the portion of unrestricted gifts each U.S. affiliate pledges to help support home building worldwide, as well as the overwhelming need for decent housing in Mexico's border communities.

Affiliates can designate or assign money tithed to Habitat for Humanity International to a particular place or affiliate. As leaders in the Build the Border program, Trinity Habitat and Houston Habitat designate their tithe dollars to the Tamaulipas Habitat affiliate in recognition of the ties that bind neighbors Texas and Mexico.

The dollars are boon to Matamoros, where homes can be built for \$8,500 each, and are backed by elbow grease. Trinity Habitat volunteers have traveled the 550 miles to Matamoros six times in the year since Build the Border began, with two more trips planned in 2008.

Trinity Habitat staffers are encouraged to take the trip, forewarned that the process of building there is a world apart from the work they do at home.

“The infrastructure needed to support the kind of homes we build in Texas does not exist in much of the world,” Trinity Habitat Executive Director Gage Yager, who conceived Build the Border, said. “On some level we know that, but to see the facts of life for people just over the border and see them with our own eyes is breathtaking. The cinder block homes we’re building in Mexico are a vast improvement on the plywood, dirt floor shacks these families come from.”

The work is challenging, even for experienced volunteers. Tools are scarce; the Texans pack their own. Most prized are cutters for the rebar that reinforces home walls and foundations; without them, rebar is cut with hacksaws, a time-consuming process.

On Yager’s advice, Tamaulipas leaders now call in a cement truck to pour the concrete roofs. Concrete is otherwise hand-mixed, and as homes rise off the foundation, it is passed in buckets up ladders, heavy work for Texas volunteers accustomed to stick-frame construction.

Volunteers rave about the rewards nonetheless. Among Build the Border’s biggest fans is the Rev. Krin Van Tatenhove, senior pastor at Fort Worth’s Ridglea Presbyterian Church. Accompanied by volunteers from his congregation and St. Stephen Presbyterian Church, also in Fort Worth, as well as Habitat regulars, Van Tatenhove has made four trips to Matamoros since Build the Border was launched.

The pastor was smitten when, on his first trip across the border, word spread that a clergyman was among the volunteers.

“One person after another asked me to pray for blessings on their families and new homes. Then a couple requested a prayer for their infant girl. I was led to their shack, about 150 square feet for a family of five: tin and plywood walls, dirt floor, no electricity, a greasy blanket for a door. I sat down on a broken sofa and they handed me Perla, only three days old.”

Even with the child looking up at him, it was not enough to pray for just one, Van Tatenhove said. He prayed for the family and for a home.

Five months later, he returned with another work group.

“Perla’s family, who now call me her *padrino*, had just moved into their new Habitat home. They couldn’t have been prouder, and I thanked God again,” he said.

He, along with all the people of Trinity Habitat for Humanity, builds quality, affordable homes according to a plan that combines volunteer labor with donations of money and materials. Sponsors and donors underwrite construction costs of Habitat for Humanity homes.

Partner families, as Habitat for Humanity home buyers are known, invest hundreds of hours of sweat equity in the construction of their homes or others' houses, working side by side with volunteers. Partner families then buy their homes, making affordable monthly payments on a no-interest mortgage held by Habitat.

Their house payments revolve back into Habitat for Humanity's work, making homeownership possible for more families. Because Habitat for Humanity is a pay-it-forward housing program, a dollar invested in its work is a buck that never stops--it just keeps building.

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