

Have Heart, Will Hammer

Rebuilding Together's angels of every faith flock to Bay Area homes in need of renovation

By Susan Fornoff
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Don Dansby will have to miss church again Sunday. But the 52-year-old Oaklander figures his team of Kehilla Community Synagogue and Temple Beth Abraham volunteers can take him off the spiritual hook when they finish installing the windows, replacing the kitchen and putting the paint on Rutha Lemons' clapboard house.

"They can't work on Saturdays, so I've got to be here on Sundays," Dansby says. "I'm in charge, so I have to ask God to give me a little grace."

Grace and kindness mix with Sheetrock and caulk all around the Bay Area this weekend and next, as Rebuilding Together frantically hammers in the final nails on scores of home improvement projects for low-income elderly and disabled homeowners. Affiliates from Santa Rosa on down the peninsula and east to Sacramento have joined in the annual effort that this year is expected to mobilize 250,000 volunteers across the country on thousands of homes and facilities.

Once known as Christmas in April, Rebuilding Together has in San Francisco and Oakland turned into year-round efforts that are



Chronicle / Kat Wade

John Caner, Rebuilding Oakland Together executive director, visits with Rutha Lemons about the extensive renovation of her home. Volunteers have more work to do here the next few Sundays and could use another carpenter or two.

directed by paid staff to enlist sponsors and teams and match them with projects from the simplest residential patch-and-paint to one that Oakland Executive Director John Caner has declared the "Super Rehab." There, Paul Radliff leads a large, skilled team from Pulte Homes to renovate three halfway houses owned and managed by Options Recovery Services for people coming out of drug and alcohol abuse treatment.

A US Bank-led army of more than 100 volunteers is descending on the Fred Finch Youth Center in Oakland to make renovations; in San Francisco, multiple teams are combining to make four workforces of more than 100 to go to work on the Family Services Agency, the James Lick School, the San Francisco Community School and Martin Luther King Jr. Child Care.

"We will have two to three thousand volunteers out in San

Volunteer Group Knows How



Chronicle / Kat Wade

Volunteer house captain John Solomon saws off the top of a weather-swelled door as he puts the finishing touches on the duplex occupied by Viola Holland.

Francisco on April 30, working on about 28 homes and 15 facilities," says Development Director Nicole Claro-Quinn. "It ranges from as few as five to 10 people on a small residential project to as many as 200 people from several teams on a big school project."

Often, the teams finish in a single day (generally the last Saturday in April) renovations that send ordinary homeowners to their knees over weeks and months.

"There are weeks of planning the scope of the work and getting materials to the site," says Dansby, a computer aided design specialist when he takes off his superhero cape. "And then we have

a large group that comes in and attacks. In a paying situation, they just don't have that many bodies."

Arcadia Maximo, a San Francisco contractor who appears on HGTV's "House Detective," has this to-do list for a Bernal Heights senior next Saturday: painting, put a fence around the backyard, give the kitchen a new floor, modify the bathroom with grab bars, install a mailbox, bring in a stove and cooktop and "maybe change out a window."

"The first time I did this, I was scared and intimidated," says Maximo, a 10-year volunteer. "I had very little experience as an apprentice carpenter, I had this idea

it was going to be like 'Extreme Makeover' on TV, and I thought 'I can't do this.' But they gave me an easy project and I had a great time doing something for a nice old lady. I quickly learned it's mainly about the small changes you can make to improve someone's quality of life."

If they're able, homeowners work alongside the volunteers. Lemons, for example, couldn't bear not to join the 35 volunteers buzzing around her beehive last Sunday.

"I am just so appreciative that I could not sit on my bottom and watch them work," says Lemons, 66, who got more than she bargained for when the workers

To Get The Heart Pounding

found dry rot throughout her house. "So I'm mostly in the way, pulling nails, trying to pick up dirt. What they are doing is great. It makes me feel guilty. It makes me feel I should do more volunteering."

A few blocks away, Athelean Jones, 81, lamented that shingles was keeping her from doing much more than saying, "Hi, thank you, you're wonderful," to the Temple Sinai crew at work on the 1920s Craftsman duplex she shares with her sister Viola Holland, 80. Jones is the Felix to Holland's Oscar, so the intense work was all on little sister's side, "cleaning schmutz and picking up debris," as volunteer Bonnie Clare put it.

"Viola's side needed a lot of work," notes house captain John Solomon, an East Bay restaurateur. "In the basement were bags and bags of recyclables and a clothes dryer on a 50-foot extension cord, unvented. It was a fire hazard, and a danger to her physically to have to go up and down stairs to do laundry. So we found a stackable washer-dryer to put upstairs."

The mere presence of the program's beneficiaries, Caner says, "provides a little heart for the volunteers," who represent the heart and soul of Rebuilding Together. Chapters all could use a few hours the next couple of weekends from skilled home improvement experts, and Dansby beseeches able carpenters to help with the final touches on Lemons' house. (See box for more information.) But careful organization by the house captains makes good use of the unskilled as well.

"You can help and make a difference without being old," says 15-year-old Arianna Kandell, scraping wood at Holland's basement sink. "I've learned to scrape windows, paint edges,



John Solomon and Lois Wachner Solomon put the finishing touches on Viola Holland's duplex.



Chronicle / Kat Wade

That's Holland's door on the right. Her sister Athelean Jones, whose door is on the left, didn't need much work. scrape wood."

Oakland is among the Rebuilding Together chapters moving toward year-round programs like the one in San Francisco, Home Safety & Independence, that has taken on the mission of keeping seniors safely in their own homes with such modifications as grab bars, railings, non-skid paint and tub and shower transfer seats.

Ernestia Barros of Bernal Heights entered Cal Pacific in February to have her leg amputated below the knee due to diabetes complications. When she came home wheelchair-bound in March, she found that volunteer Mary Gerber had been on the scene to install all of the usual improvements, plus a raised toilet seat, and to replace the sliding shower doors with a bath arm and shower curtain.

"I appreciate it very much," says Barros, who is now using a walker. "I feel safe, comfortable. I can take a shower myself and wash my hair myself. Sometimes I even

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DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR NICOLE CARLO-QUINN

go down the stairs -- slowly."

Barros' daughter Beba heard about Home Safety & Independence at the Bernal Heights Senior Center and quickly signed mom up.

"There's not a lot of red tape because we're a small agency," Claro-Quinn says. "Once we get into the home, the install is quick. Sometimes our waiting list can be long, though."

Safety needs also rank high on a long list of criteria for eligibility for Rebuilding Together's annual day, along with financial need (household income must be less than 50 percent of the median income in the county), project feasibility and stable home environment. Last year, Dansby went to work on a house in Oakland where the resident had emphysema and couldn't go far without oxygen.

"His back stairs were so rotten, you could crumble them in your hand," he says. "We got a ramp in, new stairs and fixed his back bathroom. People like that are what makes this worth it."

Right:
Rutha Lemons
chats with John Caner from the new porch and stairs that Rebuilding Together installed on her home.

Help wanted

Rebuilding Together affiliates around the Bay Area still need skilled construction volunteers (carpenters, paint professionals, plumbers, electricians) for work this weekend and next. General volunteers can start planning now for next April, or enroll in San Francisco's year-round Home Safety & Independence program, which trains the unskilled to do installations.

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