

Rebuilding on love

Helpers from various churches aid Mennonite project to put up new residences in Greensburg

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(Travis Morisse/The Hutchinson News) Mike Dewild and Scott Banta, right, load up a door from Mennonite Housing Rehabilitation Service Inc.'s self-help storage area Thursday in Greensburg for a house under construction.

GREENSBURG - Sometimes Christians travel across the globe to mission fields. Other times there is work to be done in their backyard.

Members of Wichita's Westside Church of God have been spending the past week assisting Mennonite Housing Rehabilitation Service Inc., which is working with Greensburg residents to build new homes.

More than a year and five months after a deadly tornado flattened this town, the rebuilding continues, despite the fact that volunteer resources are dwindling.

But to provide affordable housing for many of the Greensburg residents, a volunteer force is necessary, said Steve Carter, foreman with the Greensburg Mennonite Housing project.

More than 30 years ago, the nonprofit organization formed out of Mennonite churches to focus on affordable housing for low-income individuals and families. Now, as a self-help program they are supported by USDA Rural Development, with a goal of building 50 houses in Greensburg by Labor Day 2009. The project began last April, and the first 10 homes will be completed by Nov. 15.

"Volunteers are a huge part of the effort to lower the cost of houses," said Linda Howard, volunteer coordinator for the Greensburg project.

Thursday morning, Tammy Raber, one of the first 10 homebuilders, was helping Wayne Burnham clean the dust out of his house so the floors could be put down. She was part of a team of volunteers including members of the United Methodist Church at Broken Arrow, Okla.

"We put in 10 hours a week minimum," Raber said of the volunteer service required from homeowners. But as the home's completion grows closer, they are working 20 hours a week while holding down their full-time jobs.

The value of the homes, which include a two-car garage and basement, ranges from \$120,000 to \$150,000. With volunteer labor, the actual selling price could be as low as \$50,000, Howard said.

Raber, a single mom who has never owned a home, will see a dream come true for her and her daughter. Raber grew up in Greensburg but was living 10 miles to the east in Haviland when the tornado hit. She returned to Greensburg after the tornado because of this opportunity to build her own home. According to Carter, 80 percent of the people building homes through Mennonite Housing lived in Greensburg before the tornado, and 50 percent of the people are first-time homebuyers.

"Not only does this give us ownership of our homes, but we will know how to fix them," Raber said. She's learning the importance of caulking and insulation, as well as how to put siding on a house. "We are learning more about teamwork. This is a team effort, and we have grown closer because of it."

But to attain their goal of 50 homes, a steady stream of volunteers is needed, Carter said. On Thursday, not only were there groups from Wichita and Broken Arrow, but also a team from a Lutheran church in Iowa. The groups, which usually come for a week at a time, live in the volunteer village with shipping-container-like housing and meals provided.

The group could use 10 volunteers per house, but with school back in session the volunteer teams are smaller.

Sherry Mooney, a Caldwell Banker real estate agent from Broken Arrow, was busy helping clean the Burnham home.

"I was interested in learning about the green aspect," she said of the construction projects. "The qualities of the houses are very good. It looks like the Mennonites know what they are doing."

"There have been people from all over the country helping on construction of houses," Howard said. They also get a lot of retired volunteers who come in their RVs and have various skills to offer - that's how Kansas City residents Bruce and Emma Waldren came to town. After they retired and played for a few months, they offered their "do-it-yourselfers" skills to Greensburg.

"This is an awesome opportunity to come home and help populate Greensburg again," Raber said.

Getting to know the homeowners has been a great experience for Tom Broderick, who was taking a week's vacation from work so he could help with Wichita's Westside mission team. Thursday his feet were planted firmly on the ground as he stared up at the roof where other members of his mission group shingled.

"This is what it's all about - helping others. This is what God wants us to do," Broderick said. "You hear hope in their voices. They know in a short time they will have their home."