

Habitat houses turn into homes

Published: Friday, June 6, 2008 8:54 PM CDT

It's amazing - no, awesome - what has happened to the Huntersville landscape over the past five days.

Every day for the past week, hundreds of volunteers have converged upon the poor, aging community that sits in the shadow of the upscale Harbour View area. They, along with hundreds more developers, contractors, electricians and the like, have given their time - and this week, their sweat - to build 16 houses for the 2008 South Hampton Roads Habitat for Humanity Builders Blitz.

Just looking at the one- and two-story homes that have sprouted on what were vacant lots a week ago is incredible. But for those of us on the outside, who didn't sacrifice part of our vacations to participate in this monumental project, it becomes even more powerful when you talk to the volunteers and the new homeowners.

Alyxis Smith, 9, and her mother, Jann Bell, a domestic violence victim, fled from their Norfolk home three years ago. After spending months bouncing from emergency shelters to apartments, Alyxis is looking forward to having her own bedroom - a bright pink one, decked out with posters of Disney's "High School Musical" stars - and maybe even getting a new dog.

Nicole and Jason Aponte and their three kids - Antonio, 6, Alejanzdro, 5, and Alonsso, 4 - have spent the last couple of years living in a College Square apartment. Nicole is a stay-at-home mother who home schools the three children; her husband is a landscaper for the military.

Right now, school is held at the dining room table. The three boys sleep in the same room. Even though they have privacy fence, Nicole says it's nothing unusual to see young kids diving over the fence into the family's yard or to return from a vacation to find toys and bicycles missing.

Seeing the houses themselves and realizing how hard so many people worked to make them happen is amazing.

The new homeowners will formally receive their house keys during a ceremony today. In coming days, as excited families start moving into their new digs, those houses will reverberate with shouts, tears and laughter.

Finally, those houses will become homes.

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