

Suffolk's Sweet 16 is cause for celebration



Allison T. Williams/Suffolk News-Herald Builders and volunteers spent more than 32,500 man-hours working on Habitat for Humanity of South Hampton Roads 2008 Home Builders Blitz in Huntersville last week. The event wrapped up with a dedication ceremony Saturday.

By Allison T. Williams

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Hundreds turned out for the old-fashioned "Sweet 16" community block party in Huntersville Saturday afternoon.

"How sweet it is," said John Morgan, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of South Hampton Roads, waving his arm around the tidy neighborhood of one- and two-story cottages that didn't exist one week ago. "Look what we can do in a week.

"Over 2,500 volunteers put in over 32,500 man-hours of work to make it happen."

For the past week, builders, construction workers and hundreds of volunteers have worked 12-hour days to construct 16 homes for Habitat's 2008 Home Builders Blitz. The country's largest Habitat blitz wrapped up Saturday afternoon, when builders gave the new homeowners ceremonial keys to their new homes during an oftentimes emotional dedication ceremony.

"This is truly Homearama on steroids, only with a much higher calling," said Kent Jolly, of Associated Contracting Services Inc. and a member of Habitat's Board of Directors.

Residents and builders welcomed the crowd to tour the new homes after the ceremony.

"This is such a relief for us," said Jason Aponte, who has lived with his wife, Nicole, and three small children in a rental property for the past year. While in their apartment, the family had property vandalized several times.

"This is a moment of joy for us," added Nicole. "We prayed on it for months ...we had our family and friends praying for us."

For months, the family has been working on its sweat equity part of the process. The kids contributed, by planting flower boxes for the new house and participating in special kids' workshops offered by Lowe's, she said.

During blitz week, Nicole volunteered as the "gopher girl" in the Habitat's on-site office. Seeing all the volunteers work together on all the homes has been an awesome experience, she said.

"Everyone has been working in unity, with the right heart and in the right frame of mind. I don't think it could get any better."

Jann Bell, a Norfolk school bus driver, agreed, saying she has learned all sorts of new skills over the past week: painting, hanging drywall, cutting and hanging siding, framing and insulation.

"It's been a great experience," she said. "It's hard work, especially since I'm not used to hard labor. It's made me appreciate everyone's work, right down to the ditch digger, that much more.

"This is an opportunity for me to change my life and my daughter's life. We are so blessed."

Morgan said no final decision has been made on where the 2010 blitz will be held, only that Chesapeake and a couple of other cities - including Suffolk - have expressed an interest in rolling out the welcome mat for a similar affordable housing project.

The city of Suffolk kicked in \$330,000 to buy the Huntersville property for the blitz, said Morgan. He gave kudos to developer Bob Williams, who owned most of the property Habitat acquired for the project.