



Earth Day celebrated with affordable, green housing blitz

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OAKLAND — After a blood clot destroyed her liver and left her in mortal danger years ago, Alameda resident Kathy Clark was spared when a dying man donated a lifesaving replacement organ.

She said she has been trying to honor that man ever since, and got another chance over the Earth Day weekend, when hundreds of volunteers, including organ transplant survivors, turned out for the beginning of a four-day blitzkrieg of hammers and nails. The volunteers are working to complete the framing of 20 new homes in East Oakland by the end of the day Tuesday.

"It's pretty suiting to the whole Earth Day thing," Clark said. Not only are the houses under construction all certified as environmentally friendly, but Clark herself walks around with a reused vital organ.

As she put it, "I'm recycled."

Habitat for Humanity East Bay's Earth Day Build-A-Thon at 10800 Edes Ave. is the largest building event of its kind in the organization's history, executive director Janice Jensen said.

"We had about 350 people come out Saturday, and another 300 on Sunday," she said.

"A lot of these people are going to own the homes they're building. The way we work is, we sell the

homes to people in need with no down payment and a zero-interest loan, but they have to put in 'sweat equity.'"

That is, to secure ownership of a Habitat For Humanity house, applicants must commit to spending 500 hours helping labor over construction projects.

Emma Navarro, a mother of two who said her family immigrated to California from Mexico five years ago, was among the eager homeowners-to-be who, along with her husband, pitched in.

"The four of us all live in a one-bedroom apartment now," she said. Her daughters, 11 and 14, share the bedroom, while Navarro and her husband sleep in the living room.

"Everyone has the dream to have their own home," Navarro said.

"I don't think you could ask anybody who would say that's not a dream for them. But it's even more for me. I would never have been able to afford my own house in my own country. I never thought I could do it here in California."

Among the diverse collection of volunteer laborers, including students, religious organizations and youth groups, the California Transplant Donor Network joined the effort, in what volunteers called the ongoing work of paying back the gifts they were given by donors.

"It's an issue that's gotten a lot of attention lately because of Oakland police Officer John Hege," said network spokeswoman Cathy Olmo.

Hege, one of the four officers shot and killed in the line of duty in March, donated his organs and directly saved the lives of four people, Olmo said.

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"We saw tremendous impact from that," Olmo said. "And his impact and his legacy continues to live on, in the community in general but especially for those four people and their families."

Though about 70 percent of families asked to donate their loved ones' organs agree to the donation, a wait-list with more than 100,000 names across the country continues to grow because of basic information many people don't have, Olmo said.

"People think if they put the little pink sticker on their driver's license it will count," Olmo said.

"But they're not registered anywhere, and those stickers always fall off. The best way to sign up is to officially register through the DMV or just sign up at our Web site, www.donatelifecalifornia.org."

Twenty houses are scheduled to be framed by the end of the day Tuesday, when cranes will come on site to lift the roof trusses into place, Jensen said.

The homes are scheduled to be completed by mid-December, in hopes that the families can move in and be "home for Christmas," Jensen said, though closing escrow and other issues sometimes slow the move-in process.

"There will be 54 homes across a little more than 4 acres when we're done here," Jensen said. "Maybe my favorite part is watching all the homeowners work alongside each other. As we're building the physical community, we're also building the human community."

Anybody can volunteer to pitch in at a Habitat for Humanity construction site, or donate funds for building materials. For details, call 510-251-6304 or go to www.habitat.org.

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