

MONDAY PROFILE



SHERRY LAVARS/STAFF

Dick Rockwell, 89, of Lafayette, pounds nails at a Habitat for Humanity construction site April 14 in Bay Point. Rockwell is a retired attorney.

Retiree at home building homes

Habitat for Humanity longtime volunteer, 89, inspires others with his ongoing dedication to aiding those in need

By Jonathan Morales

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BAY POINT — Dick Rockwell maneuvers a pair of long two-by-fours through half-built hallways on his way to the back of the house. He measures and cuts, then hammers the wood into the frame of what will be a new room in this Harbor Road home.

Rockwell began volunteering with Habitat for Humanity East Bay after retiring from a 40-year legal career.

That was 17 years ago. And he's still going strong.

On a day when many 89-year-olds would rather be relaxing and enjoying the fruits of their years of hard work, Rockwell is helping build and remodel homes.

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The Lafayette resident is part of a group of men that spends two days a week renovating abandoned and foreclosed houses so Habitat for Humanity can sell them at affordable prices to needy families.

The group members have been working together for more than a decade. But Rockwell is the oldest of the informal brotherhood and an inspiration to the others.

"He's our star," says Bob Roche, who lives in Lafayette not far from Rockwell.

Chuck Morton, of Concord, is impressed with the way Rockwell continues to volunteer at his age.

"He's probably like me," Morton says. "You go home tired at night, but you have the pleasure of doing something to help people out."

Rockwell, who worked for a small homebuilder during his law school days, calls himself "kind of a frustrated carpenter."

"I learned just enough about building small houses to be dangerous if I was not supervised," he said.

Sitting idly by is not in Rockwell's genes. He enlisted in the Navy just weeks after the Pearl Harbor attacks. He has backpacked the John Muir Trail and canoed down the Yukon River. He and his wife, Thelma, raced sailboats for 30 years. He still walks three miles a day.

Thelma compared him to the Energizer Bunny. "You know — go, go, go. He just always goes and goes."

Dick and Thelma, both Idaho natives, moved to Cali-



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Dick Rockwell, 89, of Lafayette, works April 14 on a home in Bay Point. Twice a week, Rockwell heads to building sites in the East Bay where volunteer forces are remodeling houses for Habitat for Humanity East Bay.

ifornia after the war when Dick went to UC Berkeley on the G.I. Bill. He got his law degree from UC Hastings in 1951, and worked for the Contra Costa District Attorney's Office for five years before starting his own practice.

The Rockwells moved to Lafayette in 1955, where they raised two sons and a daughter. Both sons, and a grandson, became attorneys. Their oldest son died of an aortic aneurysm earlier this year.

"That's been very traumatic on him," Thelma said.

After retiring in 1993, Dick joined Habitat for Humanity. Thelma said he heard about the program through some of his clients who were working in Antioch. Dick gave a different explanation.

"I was a great supporter of Jimmy Carter," he said. "He was a great supporter of Habitat for Humanity."

Rockwell even got to meet the former president while building houses in South Africa.

"The one I was assigned

to was further ahead, so they selected it to show to all the visitors," he said. "Jimmy Carter was in that gang."

Although typically known for building houses from the ground up, Habitat for Humanity began the renovation program in 2008, said East Bay President and CEO Janice Jensen.

The organization purchases the houses and remodels them, making them available to those in need and in the process removing blight from neighborhoods hit hard by the foreclosure crisis.

Jensen has only met Rockwell a couple of times, but that has been enough for him to make an impression.

"He's a really amazing person," she said. "He has Habitat in his heart, and he demonstrates that quietly on a daily basis."

Troy Leiss, who manages Habitat's Contra Costa renovation program, works with Rockwell two to three times a month and says he is amazed by Rockwell's willingness to

DICK ROCKWELL

Age: 89

City of residence: Lafayette

Occupation: Retired; volunteers with Habitat for Humanity

Family: Wife, Thelma; two sons and a daughter

do whatever it takes to get the home fixed up.

"He has no reservations or even considerations about going up on a rooftop and stripping a roof or helping build new trusses for a roof," he said. "That's awesome. I think that just to have that ability at his age and just to have that desire and want to do that, it's just unbelievable."

Asked why, at his age, he is still willing to swing a hammer, wield a saw or even climb on a roof, Rockwell answers in a matter-of-fact way one might expect from a former prosecutor.

"We're making a valuable contribution to low-income people who need decent housing," he said.

The Navy veteran acknowledges the camaraderie among the men with whom he has volunteered for so many years.

"I've worked with a lot of these men for a long time," Rockwell said, "so we have a certain fellowship bond."

As Rockwell continues to hammer the frame together, Roche pays tribute from across the house.

"I hope to emulate him and be around as long as he is, doing that."

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