

Taylorsville residents happy to help rebuild home

By Amy Choate-Nielsen

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TAYLORSVILLE — Frank Leavitt should have been at work Monday.

Allen Jenkins probably could have been golfing. And Debbie Harper most likely had a long to-do list of things that should've happened yesterday.

But all of them — along with hundreds of other volunteers — couldn't think of anywhere they'd rather be Monday than in Taylorsville, building a home and reaching out to a community that will never be the same.

"It's contagious," Mayor Russ Wall said. "Compassionate service becomes contagious, and people are catching that and we're very pleased by that. I'd like to see that this project prompts other people to look inside themselves and say, 'What can I do for my neighbors?'"

The compassionate bug started biting Taylorsville residents last week, when Heart2Home, a charitable organization that renovates homes for needy families in extremely short periods of time, bulldozed the Groves family home. The Groves children have a multitude of health problems which were exacerbated by mold in the home, and the family was forced to move in with relatives to give their children a better environment.

Heart2Home, Foote Homes, Wish To Reality and hundreds of other volunteers have stepped in to completely rebuild the Groves' house from the basement to the attic in nine days. The family will return on Wednesday night to their new home.

There's still landscaping to plant, appliances to install, electrical outlets to wire and carpet to lay in the Groves home, but Heart2Home directed some of their volunteer hours elsewhere on Monday.

Leavitt held a stack of papers with more than 20 different groups of people, some of whom were hand-picked by the mayor, who needed

help. He dispatched teams of volunteers to build fences, pick up trash, tile bathrooms and carpet living rooms for other people in the community who needed help.

Leavitt, who lives a few houses away from the Groves, took 10 days off work to help with the project, and thus became a volunteer coordinator.

"We'll help those we can," Leavitt said. "We'll start at one end and see how far we can go."

Harper spent much of her Monday morning in the Taylorsville recreation center, where Real Salt Lake, Sonic and Chick-Fil-A gave away free food. There were tables of sandwiches and lines of kids waiting to get their faces painted, not to mention the balloon animals that kept magically appearing before everyone's eyes.

"They're very surprised it's all free," Harper said. "I think everyone was panicked, thinking their neighborhood would be torn up, and they're so surprised to see this happen."

Meanwhile, Jenkins — an electrician from Minnesota who's vacationing in Utah for a couple of weeks — was taking a lunch break under a tree, getting ready to get back to work on the house. Jenkins doesn't think it's at all odd that he, a 62-year-old, would choose to spend his vacation helping a family he's never met while his wife plays with the grandkids.

It's even less strange for Jenkins to spend his time this way because he knows everyone else is a volunteer, too.

"I just feel that everybody, when they have the spare time, rather than sitting at home and watching a baseball game, they could be helping out and making a difference in someone's life," Jenkins said. "To me, I would much, much rather be doing this than on a fishing boat or a golf course or anything like that."

Family returns to a home with plenty of heart

Volunteers chip in to help foundation build new house for Taylorsville family with health concerns

By Rosemary Winters
The Salt Lake Tribune

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TAYLORSVILLE - Mandalina Groves' wish list for a new abode was simple: a bedroom door that shuts, sleeping quarters for the whole family on one floor and air that her sons, Gabriel, Gavin and Michael, could breathe safely.

Today, she arrived home to find those features - and a lot more.

With the help of hundreds of volunteers and numerous donors, Utah's Heart2Home Foundation built the Groves family a 3,400-square-foot haven, complete with chic interior design, a playroom for the kids and a master suite for Mandalina and her husband, Kevin.

"This is beautiful. Oh my gosh," Mandalina gasped, crying as she entered the house for the first time.

The Groves abandoned their 1980s rambler at 4950 S. 2475 West in September after discovering toxic black mold was exacerbating their sons' already-severe health problems. They couldn't afford to fix the house or sell. Even if they removed the mold, the abatement chemicals would have made the home unsafe for the kids. So the family relied on friends and relatives for temporary shelter - until today.

Foote Homes, the volunteer contractor on Heart2Home's job, razed the old house and built a new, beige and red-brick one in nine days.

Sean Foote said the work was worth it "because of this feeling right now" as the Groves family wandered through their new, fully-furnished home in awe.

"Now they can function properly as a family and get back to a normal life," he said.

In their old home, Mandalina and Kevin slept in the basement common

area, where they could be close to their sons in case any of them needed to be rushed to the hospital.

Gabriel, 6, has a rare brain tumor that causes limited vision, sleep apnea, asthma and seizures. Gavin, 4, has breathing troubles, severe allergies and eats most of his food through a tube. Eighteen-month-old Michael also suffers from allergies and seizures.

Now, Michael has a nursery off of his parents' new bedroom - which boasts two doors and a spacious master bath - and Gabriel and Gavin each have a bedroom down the hall.

Gabriel admired a red fire engine and "the world" painted on his wall next to other brightly-colored planets and a rocket ship that sports his name.

"It's cool," the 6-year-old said of his new pad.

Taylorsville Mayor Russ Wall, who attended the homecoming event, said he "laughed" and said "good luck" when Heart2Home asked the city for help with the rapid turnaround time.

"This is probably one of the best examples of volunteerism that I've ever seen."

Of course, he added, he wasn't surprised by the huge community support - more than 300 people volunteered throughout the Groves' neighborhood for a special volunteer day earlier this week.

Kevin Groves, a nursing student and personal trainer, said the new house will be a "fresh start" for the family.

"It's changed my life because I want to be more involved like these people have been with us," he said. "We're so grateful."

Rebuilt Taylorsville home elicits tears

House done in 9 days with donated goods, labor

By **Amy Choate-Nielsen**

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TAYLORSVILLE— Mandalina Groves' jaw dropped as she stepped inside her new home.

Her eyes moved over the walls, the vaulted ceilings — the pictures of her family — and then the tears started to come.

Gone were the mold and reminders of her children's struggling health. Instead, the Groves' home is filled with new floors, new bedrooms, new carpet, new furniture, new kitchen appliances — even new food — and plenty of finishing touches that bear the unforgettable mark of many strangers.

"This is beautiful," Mandalina Groves said among gasps and quiet exclamations. "Thank you so much. This is beautiful. Oh my gosh."

Not much from the Groves' old home was saved for the new one — except two framed murals with pictures of the Groves children hanging in the living room. Many other family heirlooms were lost due to contamination.

As Mandalina Groves, her husband Kevin, and their three children, Gabriel, Gavin and Michael, moved through the home, awestruck, the silence of anticipation eventually broke way into applause.

It was the kind of moment that makes the hair on your neck stand up, said Heart 2 Home president Greg Adamson. It was payment for the hundreds of hours donated by neighbors, plumbers, contractors, electricians and myriad other volunteers.

Heart 2 Home oversaw and organized the home makeover and, from the cultured marble shower to the custom stainless steel kitchen counter, completed the project entirely from donations. It wouldn't have been possible to rebuild the home in nine days if so many people in the community didn't pitch in, Adamson said, but that's the whole point.

"We say this is the 'Groves Makeover,' but the truth of it is that this is a community thing," Adamson said. "It's obviously the Groves' home, but it will always be a community home. Everyone in this community has a vested interest in this home and it's a part of them."

Footnote Homes knocked down the Groves' old home less than two weeks ago because it was uninhabitable and contaminated with black mold. The family hadn't lived there for six months because

extensive efforts to clean the mold — Mandalina Groves scrubbed it three times a week with hospital sterilizer — were unsuccessful. The Groves children already suffer from rare medical conditions, and the mold in the home exacerbated the problem.

Volunteers from across the state, and in some cases, across the country, then stepped in to help. Local businesses donated goods and materials and IKEA furnished the entire home with a \$15,000 donation. For James McClure, Mandalina Groves' brother, that help has been priceless.



"Everyone wished they had enough money to build them or buy them a new house," McClure said. "It's so surreal, I never thought something like this would happen with my family."

Many Taylorsville residents don't know the Groves, but rebuilding their home has changed the whole community, Taylorsville Mayor Russ Wall said. More than 300 volunteers working on the Groves project exerted their efforts elsewhere in the community on Monday, building fences and helping other homes.

"This has been a great project for our city," Wall said. "This project was not just this house. It was throughout the entire city of Taylorsville and I don't know how you could bring a community more than right here."

Jenna Perego, one of the Groves' neighbors and family friend, said she can already see a difference in her neighborhood, and it's not just the new landscaping.

"You'd come here and watch the house be built and you'd see people from one street away that you'd never met before," Perego said. "It's phenomenal."



Photos: Tom Smart, Deseret Morning News & Heart2Home.com