

World Changers group fixes homes in West Wabasso

By Elliott Jones
staff writer

WABASSO — The view out the van window startled Leah Perkins, 11, as the driver stopped, switching off the engine.

Leah, Daniel Stanfield, 11, Rob Terry, 30, and 379 others came this week from other states and the comfort of their homes to voluntarily help fix more than 26 low-income homes on the side roads of West Wabasso. They're part of World Changers, a Baptist missionary program for youths ages 11 to 18.

Leah's own home in Salisbury, N.C., is brick, big and on a paved street, she said.

On Monday, her van turned off County Road 510 and onto a rutted dirt driveway leading into a patch of woods. Back in there is the rundown wooden home of Annie Edwards, 96.

Leah stretched out her arms to show how big Edwards' kitchen is. "My kitchen, at home, is as big as her whole house," said the girl.

Edwards' uninsulated home has a tar roof. Foundation timbers have some rot. The floorboards give some. Her china cabinet has cobwebs. There were holes in the exterior siding.

But it is her home and has been since 1941.

She beamed as youths and adults worked in the sun while fixing her home's exterior, applying paint and repairing holes.

"They're doing good work" fixing things she doesn't have the money or ability to do, Edwards said.

Throughout the small community, other 12-member World Changers crews did similar work: putting gallons of fresh paint on old walls and making minor repairs to homes that otherwise would have just sat there, said Julianne Renk, an Indian River County Health Department employee.

About 1 1/2 years ago, Renk got a grant to go door to door in the community to find out what people wanted. "It was a place lost in time," she said.

It took a while for Renk to gain residents' trust. As she stood outside Edwards' home on Wednesday, she waved at Vernon Safford, a 44-year-old West Wabasso resident who earns his living doing odd jobs.

His hands were coated with dirt from yanking weeds by hand from around a house next door to Edwards' place.



"She's an angel," Safford said of Renk. He is living in a Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer. It is adjacent to his real home — a single-room shack that Edwards said is the worst house in West Wabasso.

Renk has gotten to know all the residents personally. More importantly, she said, she found what they wanted: street lights.

Two years ago, a man was shot in the arm in the dark not far from Anderson's home. For years, residents have complained that drug dealers worked at night in their community.

Earlier this year, a state grant paid for putting in street lights. When they were turned on, "One resident was out in the street clapping," Renk said. Then in the past six months, five uninhabitable houses were knocked down.

Above all else, "they wanted safety" and stability, the health department worker said. It is Renk who helped steer World Changers to West Wabasso.

Anderson used to sleep on a wooden bed weakened by termites. At Christmas, Renk's father, Jeff Renk of Vero Beach, used money intended for presents to buy Anderson a new bed. It is covered with a red bedspread. On it is a can of bug spray.

Renk felt a mixture of bliss and tears as she watched the World Changers crews at work.

"It is more valuable than you can imagine," she said.

Much more needs to be done, but the week of work "gives residents a sense of hope," said Billie Minnis Jr., a 52-year-old disabled bus driver who is a West Wabasso community leader.

"For years, we have asked for things to be done" by government agencies, he said. His father, Billie Minnis Sr., asked, too. "We asked and asked. Things kept being pushed on the back burner."

This week, the Indian River County Commission voted to move ahead with plans to bring public water to the community. Residents now drink private well water browned by all the iron in it.

Today, the World Changers crews finish their outdoor work and head home to North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. Leah plans to go fishing with her family on North Carolina's Outer Banks. Daniel's family is going to Busch Gardens, Tampa.

They leave behind West Wabasso and the floors they slept on at night at the Vero Beach High School. Next year, they may come back to continue working in West Wabasso or other areas in Indian River County.

"I pray she will be happy with the house," Leah said of Anderson.

As for Daniel, "I will be thankful for the things I have."

