

World Changers redo Wabasso

The volunteer group will work on homes in the area's west side

By Elliott Jones
staff writer

WABASSO — Annie Edwards, 96, often just sits, looking out her kitchen doorway.

It's her life: Staying in a home where she raised five children, while "working in the groves, everything," she said. And, "I prayed to the Lord."

Her husband died in 1962. She retired in 1981.

Money is in short supply. House repairs go undone: the roof, the painting and a hole in her bedroom wall that is open to the outside.

But a contingent of 365 teenagers from throughout the nation came to Indian River County on Saturday and will stay through June 18 to work on her house and 25 other residences in west Wabasso, many of which date to decades before the youths were born. In all, 382 youths and adults will be here.

The volunteer workers are from World Changers, a Southern Baptist Convention mission group. This summer, West Wabasso is one of 90 sites in the nation where 93,000 World Changers volunteers will be doing everything from painting to simple wood repairs.

Each youth pays \$260 to join the program. In Indian River County, they'll stay at the Vero Beach High School and sleep on the floors. An array of 21 Indian River County churches are providing lunches.

Each day, the workers will go to County Road 510, a main transportation route between the beaches and Interstate 95. Halfway between are roadside vestiges of another era — pre-integration. West Wabasso was the place black agricultural laborers were expected to live, said Eugene Douglas, president of the West Wabasso Civic Progressive League.

And it was affordable for them.

Today, the roadside is a game room in an aging building, a few boarded-up buildings and some homes. That reflects what is off the road: a residential area with a large number of lower income residents, as well as working people, such as Douglas, an employee of the New Piper Aircraft Inc.

It is the lower income homes that attracted the attention of Julianne Renk, an environmental specialist with the Indian River County Health Department.

In her job, she has gone door-to-door on the side roads and seen the living conditions. "There are a lot of issues out there" in a square-mile residential area of about 150 homes, Renk said.

Then came the opportunity to do something: World Changers decided to do a work project in Indian River County because of last year's hurricanes. When World Changes

World Changers work plans

- The Baptist youth mission group will be painting and repairing 26 lower-income homes in West Wabasso through Saturday. The houses are north and south of County Road 510 from 58th to 66th avenues.
- Teams of 12 to 15 youths, with adult supervisors, will work on each house.
- About 60 percent of the homes are occupied by elderly women. Also, some are the homes of couples, of various ages.
- World Changers isn't the first to help in West Wabasso. Some local citizens groups have helped repair homes there through the years.

Source: World Changers and Indian River County officials

approached county officials about helping out, Renk successfully lobbied for them to focus on West Wabasso.

"I showed World Changers pictures of the community and Census figures on the median family income being \$6,950," she said. "World Changers representatives were sold. They saw the need."

Repairs will be made with \$16,000 donated to the Treasure Coast Baptist Association. Of that, the Treasure Coast Homeless Resource Center, of Vero Beach, donated \$13,000, said World Changers officials.

The money will buy 600 gallons of paint, as well help pay for repairing roofs on three homes, including Edwards' house.

"Many of the homes still don't have repairs from the hurricanes," Douglas said. "Having people come and do the work will save money. Labor prices are so high now."

Indian River County government has committed \$20,000 to have World Changers in the county again next year, said David Malone, the Treasure Coast coordinator of World Changers.

"I can see us here for five years, working in West Wabasso and Gifford," said Malone.

Until now, the group worked for six years fixing homes in Fort Pierce.

Joel Dramis of Port St. Lucie is the local World Changers construction coordinator.

During the past three months, he and 11 others have been working weekends pressure washing the West Wabasso houses so the structures will be ready for painting and other work.

"Some people ask why the residents don't just buy \$20 in paint and fix their own houses. But an extra \$20 is something they don't usually have," Dramis said.