

Volunteers build home in a day for Wabasso's 'Big Mama'

By DAN GARCIA

WEST WABASSO — Rome wasn't built in a day. But Big Mama's house was. Hundreds of good-hearted volunteers labored in the hot sun Saturday to do something that is rarely accomplished in the home-building industry.

They built a new home for Margaret "Big Mama" Brown in less than 24 hours, mainly as a way to keep the 62-year-old Brown from becoming homeless once her right to a FEMA trailer expires.

The workers — electricians, plumbers, roofers, drywall installers, etc. — donated their time as a way of thanking Brown for serving her community by providing a safe haven for youths who use her yard as a playground.

About 6 a.m. Saturday, work crews converged at Brown's home site, 6370 87th Lane, near County Road 510. The foundation had been poured previously, and the exterior walls went up Friday night in anticipation of rain Saturday.

County building inspectors approved the work as it went on.

Around noon, Indian River County building contractor Joe Telese handed Brown an oversized mortgage document for the home.

Cheers erupted from the crowd of workers as Big Mama tearfully tore the document to pieces.

Telese's company, Regatta Construction LLC, and his subcontractors built the 1,300-square-foot wood-frame house, valued at \$115,000, free of charge. Brown, whose home was torn down after hurricanes Jeanne and Francis left it uninhabitable, had been living in a FEMA trailer for a year.

Brown received the keys to her new home about 8:15 p.m. and proclaimed, "This is truly a miracle."

Then she began singing "Amazing Grace." The others joined in.

"Everyone working here today has blessed me," Brown said. "I'm so happy to be out of that trailer."

Brown's new home was the culmination of a project launched more than two years ago by Julianne Price, an environmental specialist with the Indian River County Health Department, and Sheriff's Detective Teddy Floyd, who worked together to assess the needs of West Wabasso neighborhoods.

"When we first walked through here, Big Mama was sitting on the porch and there were about 15 kids playing basketball in the front yard," Price recalled.

"Big Mama is a good example of being a pillar of the community. She played an important role in the community by watching over all those kids."



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Margaret Brown, center, of West Wabasso, hugs her daughter, Justene Diane Green, of Gifford, while flanked at left by another daughter, Mary Peterson. Dennis Witherow, right, president of Regatta Construction LLC, helped hold up an oversized mortgage agreement that was later torn up to signify the home was built for free. About 400 volunteers labored from before sunrise to build Brown a new home on Saturday.

Floyd, who works with the Sheriff's Community Policing Division, said of Brown: "She reaped good seeds. Now she is reaping what she sowed."

Brown is a former custodian for the Indian River County School District, who also worked packing tomatoes and cucumbers. She had to stop working after suffering a heart attack and a stroke, said her daughter, Justine Peynado.

Brown, who was born in her West Wabasso home, said she always allowed youths to play basketball and football in her yard, mainly because there are not many options for them.

"I love children," Brown said. "My mother did the same thing for children in the neighborhood."

Because Brown faced eviction from the FEMA trailer Sept. 26, Price and Floyd sought help from Port St. Lucie building official Joel Dramis, who leads a local chapter of World Changers, a Baptist youth group that helps repair aging houses throughout the country.

Dramis and Telese have teamed up since 1991 to repair or build homes for needy residents in Fort Pierce, Gifford, Florida City and other locations.



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Bob Littleton, associate pastor of Lakeside Fellowship, brings a load of mulch for Margaret Brown's new yard in West Wabasso on Saturday.

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'Big Mama' gets a new house

Volunteers donate time, work to replace structure hit by storms

*BY REBECCA ADAMUS
FLORIDA TODAY*

SEBASTIAN - Margaret "Big Mama" Green Brown spent nearly two long years cramped in a FEMA trailer with her family members.

On Saturday, the trailer became a remnant of the past. Brown, 62, watched as workers built a house in the spot where her childhood home was demolished by the 2004 hurricanes.



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'Big Mama's' house. Contractors Matt Bacon, right, and Walt Poston work on the foundation of Margaret "Big Mama" Green Brown's new house. Dozens of volunteer groups pitched in to build the house in Sebastian. Rebecca Adamus, FLORIDA TODAY

"I'm too happy and blessed," she said softly while sitting in a minivan, dabbing swollen eyes with a washcloth. "I'd rather be in a house than a trailer. I didn't have anything to get a house back."

Since Big Mama couldn't rebuild, community members came to her aid. And they built the 1,080-square-foot house with three bedrooms and one bathroom in one day. It will cost nothing -- a gift for a woman whose home and heart have always been open in Wabasso. The home's value: \$115,000.

"Her heart is gold. She's just a good person -- an icon in the community," Teddy Floyd said. As a youth he used to come around Big Mama's house to get frozen Kool-Aid on a stick. Big Mama's basketball court, also frequented by Wabasso kids, was also destroyed.

Dozens of civic groups and local businesses contributed the supplies and labor needed to get the house built, including Vero Beach-based Regatta Construction LLC, which sent many contractors. Young girls sold \$1 wristband-with-a-message bracelets that read "Dedicated to Big Mama."

Affordable housing is difficult to come by, said Julianne Price, a friend of Big Mama and a local community activist. Big Mama's house would stand as an example of how a community can come together to help someone get into a home, she said.

"It's taken all of us to work together to have this end result," she said. "She's a big Mama to everybody."

Buzz in the neighborhood and the loud sounds of construction attracted many passersby. South Carolina visitor Keon Green, 24, volunteered for clean-up duty. He said he didn't know Big Mama but "at the last minute came just to help out."