

Kindness rules in Wabasso

Aid pours in, brightens poor residents' lives

BY LINDA JUMP

WABASSO -- When Caesar Pena of Rockledge read a newspaper article about this poor and rural community, his heart was moved.

He immediately drove here and asked how to find Margaret Green Brown, who was among those featured in the story in May. The woman lives with three generations of her family in a run-down house.

Now, Pena and his wife, Joan -- retirees from Cape Cod -- have visited the Browns several times, providing groceries and clothing, adopting two puppies she couldn't care for and helping her granddaughter get school supplies.

"We love them all," Joan Pena said. "I wish I was a millionaire so I could do more to help everyone. . . . I can't believe people live like that here in the U.S."

West Wabasso has learned a lot about the kindness of strangers since the Indian River County Health Department got a \$30,000 federal grant to help the 500 residents decide what they need and how to get it. The area has a median household annual income of just more than \$6,000.

Julianne Renk, a county environmental health specialist, said she has been inundated with offers to build or repair homes in the community, of used trailers to replace some that are uninhabitable, and donations of time, talents and resources to assist residents.



More helpers

Some other developments in West Wabasso:

Habitat for Humanity is seeking sites for a group of new homes.

County road crews graded the sand roads to eliminate deep ruts and a few new roads are planned to improve access for emergency vehicles.

Forty-four street lights will be installed.

\$500,000 has been pledged for a new community center.

Volunteers picked up more than 20 bags of trash in the neighborhood.

Between 75 and 86 homes, where there are health problems, will be hooked up to county water and sewer.

"Everybody's eyes are on Wabasso now," said Indian River County Detective Teddy Floyd, who is working with the health department's Julianne Renk on the project.

"It's amazing how much has happened in six months," Renk said. "When I started, people said I couldn't accomplish anything because I didn't have any money for the projects. But it just took people to come together."

Stephanie Goins, who runs CCDI Inc. Construction Services in Cocoa Beach, read the same newspaper article and recalled times in her life when she was down on her luck.

"I couldn't have made it without my church and community," she said. The general contractor has worked with local Catholic schools and fellow contractors to set up teams with technical advisers prepared to repair and build homes in Wabasso one weekend each month.

"Hopefully, we can do a little bit to help," Goins said.

Their first task will be building a new home for Freeman Wiggs, 81, who now lives in his car instead of a dilapidated 63rd Avenue shack that was torn down on Tuesday.

Wiggs watched without emotion as the house he called home from the 1960s until two years ago, when he moved into his 1989 light blue Chrysler, was crushed into two truckloads of debris within two hours.

His sole comment: "I've been looking at that thing for 30 years."

Calvin Godwin, who owns Affordable Trucking & Land Clearing in Wabasso, said he has known Wiggs all his life and remembers him as a hard-working man who always had a job in the citrus groves.

Godwin and his wife bought the property from Wiggs and will allow him to live there in the new home until his death.

"He just had no place to go, so we had to help him," Godwin said. "He never got into trouble. He's just down on his luck now."

Here are some other examples of the outpouring of help for the people of Wabasso:

Elois Harden and her two teens share one bedroom in a dilapidated, orange and white trailer. They'll get another one from Sandler Pinecrest LLC, a developer who recently took over a property where usable double-wide mobile homes were left by the former owner.

"It's a real blessing and we're so happy that somebody cares," said Harden, who has lived in the trailer for 14 years. "We'll have our own bedrooms and now we don't even have a kitchen sink."

New bus service also makes it possible for her to get to her job at the new location of the Daisy Hope Center.

Volunteers will fix the sagging roof, replace a cardboard-covered window over the sink and repair lights that don't work at the small cinderblock home of Ardile Black, 89.



When Black found out, she threw her arms into the air and shouted, "God is good." Her eyes filled with tears, and she bear-hugged those around her.

"Thank God for the people coming forward," said the former worker at a Grant crab house, who is well-known for her sweet-potato pie.

Sara Lorenzen, a senior to be at Melbourne Central Catholic High School, is coordinating students to volunteer in Wabasso. She's done volunteer housing repairs during a Catholic Heart Camp in Orlando the past two summers.

"Me and my friends want to help," she said.