

Families get new homes

By Keona Gardner staff writer

WABASSO -- Holes adorned the walls of Elois Harden's mobile home at 5740 85th Place, like family pictures.

There were too many holes in the ceiling, floor and walls, in two of the home's three bedrooms, that she and her children, Timothy Pace, 12 and Pakeya Pace, 11, slept together in a queen-size bed in one room.

"It was just a piece of roof over our heads," said Harden, 38.

But that all changed Thursday, when the family received a free doublewide mobile home.

The new home is one of three mobile homes donated to Wabasso families from the owners of Safari Pines mobile home park, Sandler at Pine Crest LLC.

The park sits on more than 10 acres of the 339-acre Dodger Pines Property that Sandler bought for \$17 million.

A master-planned housing community will replace the park, said Bob Swift, the Vero-Beach based development project manager for SouthStar Development Partners Inc. of Coral Gables.

SouthStar develops a number of Florida properties for the Virginia-based Sandler company. To prepare the land for development, Swift had to remove the mobile homes left by the park's residents. In October 2002, the residents were given an eviction notice to move by Oct. 10, 2004.

Instead of scrapping the homes, Swift contacted Julianne Renk, Indian River County's environmental health specialist who works with Wabasso residents assessing environmental problems there, to see if the homes could be used.

"The people (in Wabasso) are living in shacks and really need some help with housing," Renk said. "It's the worst living conditions I've ever seen."

Because Harden's new mobile home was too big to move intact, crews from Affordable Trucking and Land Clearing split the home in half and delivered half of the home Wednesday and the other half Thursday afternoon.

The former home was demolished last Tuesday and Harden and her children had been staying with her mother in Wabasso.

Harden and her children lived in the former mobile home for 11 years with a leaky roof, holes in the walls and floor, and a broken kitchen sink.

"We washed dishes in a 5 -gallon bucket and bought water at the store to drink," Harden said.

When it would rain, the family put buckets on the floor to catch the water but still has to mop the floor every 30 minutes to keep it dry, Hardens said.

"Sometimes it made me feel bad and I wasn't making any money to move anywhere else," Harden said. She works part time as a receptionist for the Daise Hope Center, an afterschool program, earning \$300 a month. She used to receive child support from her children's father, but he stopped paying. Next month, she starts working full time at the center.

Despite Harden's dire economic situation and even worse living conditions, the hardest part was knowing the embarrassment the home caused her children.

"People didn't want to come over because it was raggedly," Timothy said.

With a new home comes a feeling of happiness and gratitude. "It's a blessing from God," Harden said. "I'm just happy somebody thought of me because I sure couldn't afford it."