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In Long Beach: 'It's all about helping people'

Story and photos by Doris Benavides

St. Joseph Church's second-year confirmation students were exhausted after a few hours of pounding nails on a hot March 28 morning. But they knew the effort was worthy.

"I did not know how hard it is to build a house. It is exhausting," said Nancy Lopez, 23, who recently earned a Political Science bachelor's degree from UCLA. "But it's good to know this house will go to a family who does not have a house or cannot afford a house."



In about five hours, 40 students and their sponsors pre-built two 12-foot by 12-foot "loft-houses" that, this month, will be trucked to Mexico. There they will be assembled at a low-income colonia (neighborhood) on the outskirts of Ensenada.

The activity was coordinated by Marianna Wescott, St. Joseph's confirmation director, who wanted the students to have a hands-on experience that could reaffirm the social justice core concepts learned in the classroom.

Through another parishioner she learned about Hands of Mercy, a volunteer-based nonprofit agency, directed and cofounded by Rick Carter, that trains people to build loft houses for Mexican low-income families. The project was the perfect fit for Wescott's plan.

"I want the students to get inspired; to learn that justice is for all and that it is great to get involved with the community," said the master catechist. "I want them to look outside in their immediate surroundings and get involved."

A history of helping

When St. Joseph's pastor, Father William J. Connor, was told about the plan, he did not hesitate on backing it.

"Absolutely!" he said when asked if he agreed with the idea of partnering with a non-denominational Christian nonprofit such as Hands of Mercy (HoM). "I told Marianna to go ahead and do this. It's all about helping people."



The parish has a long history of helping less fortunate communities. Last October it was honored by the San Pedro Regional Catholic Charities for its contribution to social justice.

"Project achieve" is their main outreach flag. The parish gets involved in the preparation, transportation and serving of dinners to underserved people living in a warehouse in the west side of Long Beach. As part of that same project, once a month, young adults prepare and serve breakfast to the same community.

In previous years the church ran an outreach program together with the nonprofit Corazón that provides shelter and education to low-income residents of Baja California, Mexico. Volunteers traveled to Mexico and built houses on-site, but the outreach ended last year with the implementation of stricter regulations at the border and for safety reasons.

"Parishioners at this church are very generous and giving," said Father Connor, St. Joseph's pastor for more than eight years.

The loft-house pre-building endeavor supports his statement. The whole church, led by confirmation students, got involved in fundraising activities that started last October with a dinner at Ruby's, followed by fundraisers held after Masses.

They needed to raise \$6,000 (\$3,000 for each house's building materials.) And they did it on time.



About 100 people showed up to the Saturday activity, including students, their sponsors and HoM volunteers. Most of them expected the task would be overwhelming, but six HoM builders helped the beginners.

"This was easier than I thought it would be," said sponsor Anastasia Hubbard.

"It's not too hard and it's worthy," said Kelly Freire, 16, a tenth grader at Long Beach Polytechnic High School. "It's helping me see that I do not have to take things for granted, such as having a house."

'We build in the name of Jesus'

Gordon Mellis, HoM's pre-fabrication director, is used to seeing the volunteers' excitement and surprise. He has worked with hundreds of volunteers since he joined the organization in 2002.

The self-employed software engineer spends his weekends training members of churches of different denominations, students of Southern California schools and colleges, and members of civic groups, on the pre-building of the two-story loft houses.

"We encourage people to get involved," he said. "And they don't even have to be Christians. We just build houses in the name of Jesus, who wants us to carry out His ministry to poor people."



The house structure includes four windows, a lockable door, and a second story attic loft for sleeping that is reached by an interior ladder. The houses are not wired or plumbed, since they are located in communities that lack such utility services.

Each house, assembled in about six hours, is equipped with a gas stove, a table and an empty bottle of gas propane used in Mexico to cook. Residents also receive a set of pots and pans, camping-type mattresses, a broom and a Bible in Spanish.

Families that receive the houses are selected by partnering Mexican Christian churches. Apart from their socio-economic status, the requirements include agreeing to live in the house for a certain minimum time, and to receive the house "in the name of Jesus."

"I wish I could go down to Mexico to assemble," said Mike Oates, who accompanied his daughter, student Mallory Oates, to the "unifying" event. "This was a great experience. And these guys are great!"

For information about confirmation classes at St. Joseph, contact Marianna Wescott, (562) 598-0519. To contact Hands of Mercy, go to www.handsofmercy.com.