

Visalia Times-Delta

Concrete angel

Contractor volunteers with Self-Help Enterprises, now in its 50th year

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When volunteer John Torres first shows up at a Self-Help Enterprises project, he looks at the faces of the new homeowners. He said he knows he intimidates them but after a couple hours they warm up. 'It's on,' he said. 'We're like family.'

More than two years ago, John Torres, a cement contractor, noticed a new housing project in Clovis. He drove to the construction site.

What he saw moved him to respond. Men and women were shoveling rocks and sand into wheelbarrows to make concrete for foundations.

"It didn't look right [to me]," he said. "I asked if they needed any help."

Torres, owner of TNT Cement Work, went and got his truck, tools and two Bobcat tractors. He's been bringing his expertise, Equipment and friendly attitude to each new construction site for Self-Help ever since.

Around Self-Help, he's known as the "Concrete Angel."

"Mainly, what I really enjoy is working with the

people," he said. "I bring my skills." He's on site at the beginning of each new subdivision to help lay foundations and at the end to pour and smooth concrete driveways. Self-Help begins building subdivisions in the spring and summer time and finishes up about 10 months later.

"After it's all over, they still remember me," he said.

Milestone

Self-Help Enterprises begins its 50th year this month. This nonprofit began in Visalia as a response to Edward R. Murrow's documentary "Harvest of Shame" broadcast on CBS in 1960 about the plight of American migrant agricultural workers. It motivated a committee associated with the Quakers to do something about it, said Dirk Holkeboer, director of the Self-Help new homes program.

Committee members got to know farmworkers and listened to what they felt they needed to improve their lives and the lives of their children, "Housing was the repeated message," he said.

Working with families, the first three Self-Help houses were built in Goshen in 1965 with donated money. By the end of 2013, the nonprofit celebrated the completion of its 6,000th home.

"We're proud of that," he said. "It's a milestone to all the families who have made those sacrifices and extra effort to have an affordable and decent place to live."

Self-Help pioneered the concept of self-help home ownership for low-income families who don't have the resources to become homeowners.

Now there are more than 100 similar nonprofits across the country.

How it works

When Self-Help puts together a project site, for example in Dinuba where 11 houses are being built, the staff publicizes the opportunity and works with applicants. To qualify, families must make no more than 80 percent of the median income for that area.

For a family of four in Tulare County, that is \$37,000 or less a year. Most of the families who benefit from Self-Help make \$20,000-\$35,000, Holkeboer said.

"They are resourceful, hard-working people who through this program are able to realize a dream they would not otherwise have," he said. Self-Help packages a loan application for each family to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) which has a special home mortgage program for low-income residents of rural communities.

The USDA has a similar mission to Self-Help, that is, to assist people who live in rural America, many of whom work in agriculture-related jobs. About 60 percent of the Self-Help families are seasonal farmworkers, he said.

Each family builds or performs about 70 percent to 75 percent of the labor on its house, not by themselves but as part of a group of future neighbors.

For example, in Dinuba, all 11 families work on each others houses and nobody moves in until all the houses are complete.

They all have a self-interest in getting all the homes finished, he said.

Torres stands out

Although Self-Help Enterprises is not volunteer driven, it does welcome volunteers such as AmeriCorps volunteers from time to time. A volunteer contractor such as Torres, stands out.

He's fallen in love with the Self-Help mission and he looks for opportunities to lend his expertise, Holkeboer said.

"He helps them realize their dreams quicker," he said. "His expertise makes better end results."

Torres, 57, has made an appearance at every Self-Help new home site during the last two years in Clovis, Reedley, Goshen, Madera, Dinuba, Goshen and Lamont.

In December, he was recognized with a certificate of appreciation at the celebration for the 6,000th house in southeast Reedley, a subdivision of 30 homes.

He not only volunteers his own time, but pays his employees to help out in the summer time when concrete dries much faster than in the winter time.

Families are grateful

The Self-Help homeowners are lucky to have John, said Ashley Chavez, 24, who was working on her parents' Self-Help house on Feb. 13. Her father works at a distribution center in Goshen and her mother, who is disabled, babysits Chavez' 3-year-old daughter.

"There's not a lot of people like John working for free and coming all the way from Clovis," she said.

Erik Serna, 26, whose house is right behind that one, said Torres shows homeowners how to do everything.

"I feel I can get a job in cement now," he said.

Currently, he works for Odwalla Juice in Dinuba.

Serna knew about Self-Help homes because his parents have a Self-Help house that was built in 1994. He signed up for his own Self-Help house 3-4 years ago and waited for another subdivision to begin in Dinuba.

As he smoothed a concrete driveway, he said it reminded him of food.

"It's like making a big cake and spreading the icing," he said.

Afterward, Torres showed them how to "cut the cake" by creating deep joints down the center of the driveway to prevent cracking later on. Next, he used a crazy trowel he calls "La Loca" to smooth the cake again.

Olivia Garcia is building a Self-Help home that she'll share with her two grown children and one granddaughter. For more than 20 years, she's labored in the fields and packing sheds. She said Torres' help allows her to help her family.

"He's a good person and a good friend," she said.

Learning experience

Although Torres considers himself a people person, he admits that it was a little frustrating working with unskilled people at first. He said it takes patience and time to work with people who don't know how to lay concrete.

"It's always new people on each project," he said. "I try to spread myself out on every job."

Self-Help builds homes in Tulare, Kern, Kings, Fresno, Madera and Merced counties.

When Torres arrives for the first time at each Self-Help construction site, he looks at the new homeowners' faces. He said he knows when they look at him, they feel intimidated.

"He looks like a tough man, but he's a teddy bear inside," Chavez said.

Torres keeps encourages them as he gives them instruction, saying "You got it" and "Take it from there." Soon everyone is more relaxed.

Then it's game on, he said.

"If I had to keep a straight face, I wouldn't come around here," he said. "We're close like family."

After the concrete work is finished, he can get teary-eyed.

"When the project is done, that's a sad day," he said. "It's time for them to finish it off without me."

But he always sees them again at a block party for the new subdivision when the new homeowners get their house keys.

I go to every one of them because there's food," he said. "I don't miss too many meals."

Motivation

Before Torres started volunteering with Self-Help, the project superintendent was the person who taught families how to lay the foundation on the first 2-3 houses and after that they worked independently under supervision, said Ricardo Arvizu, superintendent of the current project in Dinuba.

Now, Torres works side-by-side Self-Help families, offering his expertise at critical moments as well as putting in full days installing sidewalks as needed, drive approaches, driveways, walkways, patio and foundations for the house and garage.

For the Dinuba site, he's put in more than 40 days of work.

"He's like an angel for these people," he said.

His fellow contractors and even his employees sometimes ask him why he volunteers his time and money for Self-Help families.

He puts his hand on his heart and points to the homeowners.

"It comes from here," he said. "If you meet some of these people, you would feel good about yourself."