

The Gustine Press-Standard

Sweat equity empowers new homeowners

Shared labor forges neighborhood bonds as homes go up

By The Gustine Press Standard Staff

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GUSTINE - The community's newest neighborhood is home to residents who forged close bonds while working together for a year to achieve home ownership through sweat equity.

The group of 10 home buyers were also home builders, committing 40 hours of labor each week which essentially served as a down payment, bringing home ownership into reach.

The fourth of five groups in a Self-Help Enterprises project encompassing more than 50 lots in the Borrelli Ranch subdivision, the proud owners were handed their keys Feb. 18.

At that moment, a year of hard work and upheaval was rewarded.

While the year was challenging, said Maricela Lopez, one of the new homeowners, "it was really worth it. The day we got the keys was when we

started living here."

Lopez was one of three project participants who shared their stories with Mattos Newspapers.

Their diversity reflects that of their group, which includes families of various sizes as well as four single owners and two brothers.

Lopez and her husband Jesus Lopez have four children, all under the age of 7.

Adelaide and Christopher Etheridge have three children, ranging in age from 4-9.

Estela Moreno-Flores is a single parent with a teen-aged son still at home.

They brought varying levels of skill to the work site - but shared a common dream of owning a home of their own.

"I was a person who barely put a nail in the wall to hang a picture. That was the extent of my construction experience," said Moreno-Flores. "I didn't even know how to read a tape measure."

Adelaide Etheridge, by contrast, grew up on a local dairy where being handy with tools was required for routine repairs and maintenance.

She was ready to take on the challenge, and others followed suit.

"My parents raised me to be strong and independent," Etheridge said. "If I was told I couldn't do something, I just did it."

Regardless of the skills that they brought to the job, the 10 owners worked and learned together, under the guidance of a Self-Help site superintendent.

The participants poured foundations, framed their houses, installed electrical, did interior painting, put in light fixtures and landscaped their yards.

"We didn't know what we were getting into," Lopez commented. "We were learning while we went."

Self-Help brought in professionals for the plumbing, excavation, dry wall, roofing and window installation.

"We probably did 80 percent of the construction," Etheridge stated.

Under the Self-Help program, friends and family can pitch in to help each buyer meet the 40-hour-a-week obligation. The families work on each other's homes, and nobody is handed the keys until all 10 houses are completed.

The year spent in construction was not without its challenges.

Juggling work and family obligations was among the difficulties.

Having employers who were understanding and flexible was instrumental, Moreno-Flores and Etheridge said, and helped make their journey possible.

Having somebody simply offer to watch her children was a huge help, Etheridge noted.

Lopez moved from Hollister to Santa Nella for the year to be close to the job site.

That often meant leaving her children in the care of relatives.

"Being away from the kids was the hardest part," said Lopez, whose youngest child was 5 months old when the construction started. "They spend more time with my mother-in-law than they did with me that year."

But, she added, "you are doing it for your children."

A job site injury also put a damper on the process.

Etheridge's husband Chris was injured May 23 while a group was attempting to install trusses in a strong wind.

"We were really going strong, but that brought everybody's morale down. It took us a while to work back from that," Etheridge said.

But the bonds growing within the group were evident in the wake of the accident.

"Just about everybody from the group went to visit him at home," Etheridge recalled. "We had a lot of moral support after Chris got hurt. We were a little behind on hours, but we got them made up. Even though we help on each other's house, everybody really stepped in and helped us with our house."

Those experiences are now in the past.

The new owners are enjoying not only a sense of accomplishment but of security.

"Now we don't have to worry about having to move. This is mine and nobody is going to kick me out as long as I do what I have to do in terms of paying the bills," said Moreno-Flores. "I can do what I want with it....I don't have to ask permission to paint a wall."

"To be able to own a home in the town where you grew up is awesome," Etheridge commented. "Being able to own our home is a great sense of security. We have a roof over our kids' heads that I know is ours."

They are enjoying not only their homes but their neighborhood.

"If we ever had an emergency and needed to ask a neighbor to watch our children, I know that they would be in good hands," Etheridge reflected.

"It is like we have been living here 20 years," Moreno-Flores concluded.