

Danbury architect has big role in makeover

By Adam Stone

CORRESPONDENT

Danbury architect Leigh Overland pointed to the busy Bridgeport construction site last Saturday, eyeballing his home design that was being developed by an army of handy volunteers. In his mind's eye, Overland explained, he saw the project quickly materializing frame by frame, like a video in fast forward.

And the final frame, Overland stressed, showcased him sharing a cold drink with Gloria Brown and her family, on the porch he had conceptualized less than three weeks earlier.

"Right now, in my mind, I'm sitting there with them," said Overland, referring to Bridgeport's Brown family.

The Browns were chosen to receive a new place to live, compliments of ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." (See article below.) And it was Overland, who was chosen to design the house.

On a sweltering Thursday, Brown got some very cool news. Not only would her three children receive full, four-year-scholarships at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, but also, the mortgage on her razed home would be paid off as well.

"Thank God, said Brown, fighting back tears." And thank you everyone. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have a bed to sleep in. Now I don't have to worry about the mortgage. I don't have to worry about tuition. I just have to worry about my paying my taxes."

With Overland leading the way, a number of area businesses and residents -- inspired in part by the Brown family's story -- descended upon Hollister Avenue in Bridgeport last Friday to begin work on the sonic-speed, 106-hour construction project.

In fact, just after the show's producer's tapped Overland for the job in late June, the veteran Danbury architect quickly assembled a team consisting largely of local colleagues.

A Ridgefield company, The Disalvo Ericson Group, was brought on for structural engineering. Danbury's Didona Associates agreed to participate as the project's landscape architect. Brookfield's Eugene Golaszewski and Mary Ellen Wheelock also volunteered their services, serving as the team's mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineers through Lawless & Mangione, a Yonkers, N.Y.-based firm. (Golaszewski had run his own firm, GT Consulting Engineers, in Brookfield from 1985 to 2005, which is how he and Overland connected.)



Members of the Brown family, from left, Fred, 16, mother Gloria, Jana, 14, and Bobbi, 17, react to the announcement by Western Connecticut State University Vice President for Institutional Advancement Dr. Koryoe Anim-Wright that the children will receive scholarships to WestConn.

The quick mobilization of these volunteer forces underscores the dedication to community service valued by Fairfield County's business community, observed Joaquin Denoya, a project engineer with The Disalvo Ericson Group.

"This just says that the area really cares about people in need," Denoya said. "It's such a great feeling to know that the work you're doing is going to help this family."

It was icing on the cake Thursday when WestConn announced its promise to pay for the four-year college tuition of each of Brown's teenaged children -- Bobbi, 17, Fred, 16, and Jana'e, 14 -- if the students choose to attend WestConn. The school currently costs \$6,624 annually. Bill Webb, a Newtown developer conducting fundraising for the makeover project, contacted the university just last Tuesday, and the administration quickly agreed to lend its support.

"We thought it fit well with our mission to provide access to the community at large," said Dr. Koryoe Anim-Wright, WestConn's vice president for Institutional Advancement. As for the show's mission, since its Dec. 3, 2003, debut, it has built 99 homes in 42 states, Connecticut being the latest. The show would not be possible without the support of local vendors from across the country. Producers are flooded with literally thousands of letters a week from people suggesting families to feature on the show.

"There is a mission in Bridgeport of community, and it starts not block by block, but house by house," said a senior producer with the show, Diane Korman, who suggested that people visit ABC.com and type in "home makeover" for more information. "When cities and communities come together to make a difference, nothing is impossible."

Aware that a new and larger house carries with it a heftier tax burden, project participants raised money to help offset those costs.

"I'm handling all the fundraising and there are things people are doing about that," explained Webb, president and CEO of Newtown's Pegasys Inc., a real estate development firm. (Webb was also the person to track down Overland, facilitating his first meeting with the show's producers.)

In addition to the brainpower provided by local architects and engineers, area businesses also stepped forward to supply materials. Ridgefield Supply contributed lumber and interior trim, among other materials.

Margaret Price Sims of Ridgefield Supply witnessed the show's crew perform its famous "door knock" last Wednesday, and watched closely as Gloria Brown learned that her family's tough luck was about to change.

"It really brought it to another level," reflected the Ridgefield Supply vice president.

"Actually seeing the family you're helping really touches your heart."

Although Overland designs and renovates dozens of homes each year in Fairfield County and the surrounding region, scrambling to complete this massive undertaking offered a unique and creatively invigorating architectural opportunity.

Normally, in designing a house, there is a significant amount of give and take between architect and client. In this instance, the only interaction -- and one-way interaction at that -- Overland experienced with the family was watching the Browns' 20-minute "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" application video that chronicled their battles with floods, fires and burglars.

But in watching the video, Overland did gain a sense of the family dynamic and the Browns' interests. That helped him produce a dream house design specifically tailored to the sensibilities of Gloria Brown and her kids.

While project insiders still want to keep the specific interior designs secret to build excitement for the broadcast, one participant did detail in broad strokes how the house was designed to accommodate the family's interests. Because the daughters are very close, common space was created for them, and they share the same turret-style bathroom, though they enjoy their own doors leading into it.

Lots of open space was created to foster interaction among the tightly-knit family.

There's a mid-house main staircase that connects the first floor master bedroom with the upstairs kids' rooms. The master bedroom, in fact, was designated for the first floor because Gloria Brown had indicated her reluctance to frequently climb stairs.

One daughter is interested in law, another in dance, while Fred is a sports nut and music fan. Generally speaking, the show will incorporate these kinds of interests into themed bedrooms through related furniture, wall decorations and equipment.

"It was an emotional experience," Overland recalled of his first encounter with Gloria Brown at the door knock. "She ran up to me and hugged me for minutes upon minutes. She was so excited. I told her she was going to love this house.

"With the video I was really able to climb into their hearts and into their worlds. The kids laughed, they cried. I felt as I do with any client. I grab a slice of their life. It's always amazing to me how much you can learn about your client by just looking into their eyes." And while project leaders like Overland were on site sweating bullets alongside the building crew from the New Canaan-based Gulick Associates, other area businesses were able to contribute from a distance.

"It's great to give to something where you can see your help being put to good use," said David Simso, general manager of Dave's R.V. Center, a Danbury business that provided the construction site with a 37-foot trailer stocked with drinks and snacks. "It's a donation where you know it's not going to get lost."

Lumber and plywood, along with the services of a truck and a driver, were provided through The Hatch & Bailey Co. Stamford yard, which is run by 19-year Newtown resident Greg Branecky.

"It just felt really good to help people in that situation," Branecky said.

Other local businesses donating services or products to the makeover include Brookfield's Are You Organized? Inc., a closet organization company, Health Net, a Shelton-based health insurance company, Danbury's Pumpcrete LLC, a concrete pumping provider, East Coast Concrete and J&J Concrete Inc., both Danbury-based concrete foundation contractors, Leahy's Fuel Inc., also of Danbury, Newtown's Mona Lisa Restaurant, as well as Haynes Materials, a Seymour-headquartered concrete and landscaping supplier. Danbury's Wally Kolek, a freelance photographer, took pictures at the scene, and the images were posted on the Web sites of various stakeholders, including Overland's.

"This home was built by so many hands," Overland concluded. "The Brown family will feel the strength and goodness in its walls."

□ Staff writer John Burgeson contributed to this story.