

Westport Family, Businesses Help Build A New Home

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Several Westport residents and businesses have been going to extremes lately by participating this past week in ABC's Extreme Makeover of a house in Bridgeport's East End.

It all began when the Emmy Award- winning show was tapped by a Westport family to give the Brown family of Bridgeport a new home after one tragedy after another befell the folks on Hollister Avenue.

First, their house was flooded and then it was damaged severely by a fire started by kids throwing firecrackers. The family escaped, but the mother, a church elder named Gloria, would not have made it out alive if her 16-year-old son, Fred, had not knocked down the front door and rescued her.

And, if that wasn't enough, their house was robbed again and again until everything of value was taken.

Soon after these three catastrophes, Marissa, Ariana and Alicia Ill, three Westport sisters in a band called Warrior Poetes reached out to Fred, their band's drummer, and told Extreme Makeover of his family's plight in March.

Marissa said she and her sisters learned of Fred and his family's situation while they were on tour

"There was first the flood, the fire and the three vandalisms, and they are the most generous people you have ever met," Marissa said on the scene of the shoot. "We knew something had to be done, so I actually took the video that was sent to Extreme Makeover."

Ariana said she thought the fortune brought upon the family was "surreal" and is very happy to see the family getting a new start in life. "I know they're going to take this and turn it around and give it back to the community," she said. "That's just the kind of people that they are."

Alicia said she can't wait for the Brown family, who has been sent on vacation for a week by Extreme Makeover to California, returns to see their new home.

"They're going to be so overwhelmed in a great way," she said.

Before moving into their Hollister Avenue home, Gloria lived with Fred and her two daughters, Bobbi, 17, and Janae, 14, in one of Bridgeport's inner-city housing projects. Despite all of the adversity, the three children host a local radio show, where they serve as a positive voice for teens in the community, and teach programs that help people express themselves through music at the church and the local community center.

From last Wednesday through today, production crews from Extreme Makeover, about 100 volunteers and many area businesses have converged on the property to create the Brown's dream house. On Friday, the production crew shot five takes of the house being blasted by a cannon before two machines with huge claws turned it into a mass of tangled debris and carted it away.

All the while, hundreds of spectators looked on and some asked Ty Pennington, the show's star, for autographs as he walked by them to and from his trailer between takes. The show's other stars -- Michael Moloney, Paige Hemmis, John Littlefield and Eduardo Xol -- were walking about between takes and giving autographs.

Leigh Overland, an architect who just moved from Danbury to Westport and was chosen to design the new home, said he is confident the Brown family will love their new home, but he wouldn't reveal the design.

"I went through the home room by room and got a feel for the family," he said. "I took a slice of their lives and looked into their eyes, so I would be able to understand what they wanted."

According to a press release from Leigh Overland Architect LLC, the firm was told it had been chosen for the project three weeks before the Brown family was told Friday they were getting a new home.

Gault Inc., a Westport-based contractor, was scheduled to install the house's central heating and cooling system from 7 p.m. Saturday to 4 a.m. Sunday and lend some trucks to help carry off the dirt for the new house's foundation. Gault will also donate heating oil to the family for the next 10 years.

Chuck Corner, a worker for Gault Inc., said he was thrilled to be part of the endeavor to give a family a new home.

"I think it's great what Ty and the production crew and all of these other businesses are doing," he said.

Asked if there will be a house to put the systems into by the time Saturday evening rolls around, Joe Thompson, another worker, said, "We hope so."

A.J. Penna & Son, a Westport-based excavating contractor, spent Friday and Saturday hauling debris off the site.

"Extreme Makeover was an excellent and fun experience for me, and I was very proud to be a part of it," Robert Garofano, one of A.J. Penna's employees, said. "Although my job was simply to haul materials, it made me realize that every small part of a job is essential for everything to come together and it was great to see all the different companies working together toward such a generous cause."

Walker Construction Co., another Westport contractor, also helped with the excavation.

In its fourth year, Extreme Makeover plans on showing the 99th episode at some point during the 2007-08 season. The show airs Sundays, at 8 p.m., on ABC.

Photos of the demolition of the old house and construction of the new one may be seen on the Web site of Gulick Associates, the New Canaan-based project manager, at www.gulickassociates.com