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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Community comes together for 'Makeover' house

Saturday, October 25, 2008
 By Gretchen McKay, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Andy Strnes/Post-Gazette

Members of the Slaughter family -- Frank, his daughter Tayana and wife Tracy get their first look yesterday as host Ty Pennington looks on.

"Hallelujah, Pittsburgh! Thank you!" shouted Frank Slaughter as he got his first look at his new brand-new 3,200-square-foot house in Penn Hills.

His wife, Tracy, agreed: "That's right -- awesome!" as she cried tears of joy yesterday and hugged their five children, who used to sleep in the same bedroom of the house that once stood here. The family then headed inside to tour the house that TV built, actually ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" and more than 2,000 local contractors, retailers and volunteers.

"It's so beautiful to see the people and say thank you to them," said Mr. Slaughter's mother, Bunny Slaughter of the Hill District.

In one week, the program's crew of designers join forces with community members to tear down an old house and build a new dream home for a deserving family. In past seasons, many stories focused on families who had suffered some sort of tragedy. This year's episodes are meant to celebrate "local heroes" who have given so much to their communities, said designer Paul DiMeo.

"We go around looking at superheroes when some of the greatest heroes are in our own backyards," said Mr. DiMeo, who built sets for the Pittsburgh Playhouse while attending Point Park College in the late 1970s.

The Slaughters, both 44, are good examples. Mrs. Slaughter, who was in the Navy for six years, mentors single mothers and provided care for children and seniors in their old home, which had water damage and mold problems. Mr. Slaughter, a sergeant with the Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections since 1997, helps facilitate a program to help inmates find jobs before they're released. He also uses rap music to tell stories that help youth discover their identity and faith.

In the late 1980s, however, he was incarcerated for a few days in that same jail on assault charges. Warden Ramon Rustin says that inmates can relate to Mr. Slaughter because he made mistakes like them.

"They want to hear life stories of people who were like them but are now successful," he said.

Local developer Montgomery & Rust, whose projects include Summerset at Frick Park in Squirrel Hill and Hampton Woodlands in Hampton, had less than six weeks to come up with the new home's Tudor-Craftsman design. Because the designers didn't see the site until last Friday's door knock at the Slaughters' old house, the house had to fit in architecturally in any neighborhood.

The family's old house had foundation problems, major water damage and mold. A sheet of plastic was the only thing keeping the weather out in the rear. It also was too small, with just two bedrooms and one bath for seven people.

The lot is just 34 feet wide, so to gain space, the designers made the new house a little longer and closer to the street than the old one. But it still manages to pack more than 3,000 square feet of living space into two levels, with five bedrooms, three full baths, two powder rooms and a large great room that opens onto a kitchen with granite countertops and cream-colored cabinetry with dark wood accents. There's also a finished basement with a special "retreat" for Mr. Slaughter. It was designed by host Ty Pennington, who spent the week shuttling between this and another project in Peoria, Ill.

Not surprisingly, the two-story house dwarfs the small cottage next door. But it still manages to fit in somehow, thanks to its understated traditional design. Says Mr. DiMeo, "It's a nice thumb, not a sore thumb."

Demolition began Sunday, a day after the Slaughters were whisked off to a free vacation at Disney World. By 2 p.m. Wednesday the house was framed, its Hardiplank fiber cement siding installed and painted, and the dimensional shingles nailed to the roof. By noon yesterday, the landscaping was complete.

"It's choreographed to the hour," said Greg Green of Montgomery & Rust.

No one but the family will get to see the interior details until the episode airs sometime early next year. All Mr. DiMeo would say about the room he's designing for 7-year-old Messiyah, for example, is that it will incorporate her love of pianos.

Designer Paige Hemmis dished a bit on oldest daughter Tayana's room, which was done in shades of purple. The 15-year-old would like to be Navy photographer when she grows up. So in addition to all the "typical" things teenage girls love, the room includes framed news photos taken by PG photographer Andy Starnes. Ms. Hemmis also included a work space where the Penn Hills High School sophomore "can fill frames with her own pictures."

Despite the economic downturn, dozens of local businesses donated goods and services worth tens of thousands of dollars. Designers from home furnishing retailers Perlora and Hot Haute Hot, for example, provided design services and furniture for the main living areas, which designer Eduardo Xol described as classic Tudor with a modern twist.

A crew of 10 from JP Phillips Tile in Canonsburg, meanwhile, laid ceramic tile in the kitchen and clad the distinctive pillars on the front porch with Eldorado architectural stone veneer. It'll mean having to absorb about \$10,000 in labor costs, but company vice president Jim Pogel considers it money well spent. And no, not just because he's a fan of the show.

"We wanted to help the family and get involved," he said.

Other local businesses donated services aimed at making the frenzied 24/7 work shifts a bit sweeter for the estimated 2,000 volunteers and skilled labor who showed up over the course of the five-day build. Joey D's Bar & Grill in Freeport was among the many eateries filling empty stomachs with sandwich rings, pizza and caffeine. Lots and lots of caffeine. Chiropractic manipulations, back massages, hair styling and eyebrow waxing were also free for the taking.

"It's a community thing," explained Dean Shorthouse, owner of Keeley's Beauty Salon in Penn Hills, which was offering free haircuts in a tented area across the street from the house.

Some volunteers knew the family but many others did not. Renae Tot of the North Side, for example, took time off from her job as a registered nurse for Primary Care Health Services to pitch in. She was among a group of choir singers from Mt. Ararat Baptist Church in East Liberty who gathered on Wednesday to serenade construction workers with a joyful rendition of "Let These Walls Come Tumbling Down."

"It's such a great cause," she said. "And I love the show."

For day-to-day photos of the build, go to <http://www.extreme.montgomeryrust.com/photos.html>.

First published on October 25, 2008 at 12:00 am

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