

Volunteers Set Home-Building World Record in East Tijuana

Professionals, Businesses Joined Baja Challenge Effort To Build 52 Homes in a Day

BY MICHELLE MOWAD

More than 500 architects, contractors, developers, real estate brokers and local business representatives built 52 homes in Tijuana in only one day last month.

The construction feat accomplished more than breaking the world record for largest number of houses built in the shortest amount of time; the volunteer effort also provided secure homes for hardworking families in Mexico.

"This is not a golf tournament where you pay and play. This is a day where you go down there and work hard," said Karen Namy, board member with Baja Challenge, a San Diego organization that challenges volunteers to use their hands, as well as their hearts, to make a difference south of the border.

Namy, with the San Diego office of commercial construction company Jaynes Corp., said Baja Challenge is an annual event where U.S. teams raise money for building materials and provide a volunteer construction team to build homes for the needy.

This year's event held Sept. 29 also had the largest number of businesses participate.

Teams met in Otay Mesa before sunrise and rallied before crossing the border. Namy said teams left at 6 a.m. and traveled 15 miles south to a small "colonia." Teams worked in the blazing heat with no shelter up to 12 hours before finishing the 16-by-20-foot homes with lofts.

"What is heartwarming for me is that there is so much enthusiasm," Namy said. "To give up and sacrifice a Saturday for a lot of hard work is amazing."

Word Spreads

Namy was approached with the idea to build homes for low-income Mexican families in 2000 by Rob Hixson, also a Baja Challenge board member.

Hixson, a senior vice president with CB Richard Ellis real estate services in San Diego, said he first learned about Project Mercy, a San Diego nonprofit aimed at improving basic living standards and quality of life for impoverished families in East Tijuana, at a chamber of commerce event in 2000.

Inspired by this meeting and with the love of Mexico instilled in him from his father, Baja Challenge was born.

In the first year, 11 homes were built. Since then 278 homes have been constructed for qualifying families through Project Mercy.

Paula Claussen, president and chief executive officer of Project Mercy, said inadequate housing of the outlying neighborhoods leads to health hazards year-round. Rats, scorpions and tarantulas invade shacks with dirt floors. Many of the makeshift shacks cannot protect inhabitants from the elements, including cold weather, rain and strong winds.

"This is purely humanitarian," Claussen said. "We are helping families at the lowest rung of the ladder trying desperately to climb up and give their families a decent life."

The program is based on need, length of time in the program and amount of "sweat equity" assistance given. Residents of these homes contribute to building at least four other houses for their neighbors before receiving their own. In addition, residents must be landowners before their house is built. Families contribute a 10 percent down payment to obtain title to government land, and pay a monthly

mortgage averaging \$125 for a parcel valued at \$7,000.

"We build houses year-round and Baja Challenge is one great big event for us," said Claussen.

Adequate Housing

Nearly half of the homes built for Project Mercy are coordinated through Baja Challenge.

"The ultimate goal is to help more people have adequate housing," she said. "That is one of the most basic of needs and that is the need that so many thousands of families along the border don't have."

Devin Beale, board member with Baja Challenge, said the spirit of helping families has been contagious.

"It has grown through word of mouth," he said, naming some of the large companies that participate such as Colliers

International, Grubb & Ellis and Pardee Homes. "Plus we have gotten better and we have learned from our mistakes."

Dave Shields, another Baja Challenge board member, boasted about the improvements made during the past eight years and laughed about some of the mishaps.

"One year everyone got lost and we couldn't find the site," he laughed. "But we get better every year."

Shields, chief finance officer and chief operating officer of San Diego-based D.A. Shields Construction, spends hours preparing for the challenge but only minutes unloading materials onto his team's dusty construction site and seconds getting to work with his team. The house he worked on for a father of three was completed by midafternoon.

Teams also add many finishing touches

to homes and offer gifts, including blankets, curtains, kitchenware, mattresses, small propane stoves, clothing and toys for children.

Donated materials have continued to offset the cost of building homes over the years. This year, donations were offered by Ahern Rentals Inc., the ConAm Group of Companies, Dixieline Lumber Co., El Camino Rentals, Howard's Rug Co., Orco, Rebel Rentals & Tours, Sunstate Rentals and United Rentals, among other companies.

In addition to the 46 teams that worked on 52 homes, El Cajon-based D.A. Whitacre Construction Inc. and Escondido-based Rocky Coast Framers Inc. provided framers for 21 homes. The San Diego chapter of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties sponsored lunch for the volunteers.

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THE BAJA CHALLENGE

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