

Volunteers pitch in to work on 20 homes in Baltimore, Annapolis

Former President Jimmy Carter among helpers on hand in McElderry Park, Clay Street communities



Former President Jimmy Carter blows away sawdust as he cuts a piece of wood with assistance from his wife Rosalynn, as they spent over an hour working with other Habitat for Humanity volunteers inside 2416 Jefferson Street, the future home of Tymeerah Butts. A total of 86 homes, in honor of Pres. Carter's 86th birthday, are being rehabilitated this week, including ten in Baltimore. (Amy Davis, Baltimore Sun / October 4, 2010)

Tymeerah Butts wasn't alive while Jimmy Carter lived in the White House. But the 26-year-old Dundalk woman can tell visitors to her future home that a former president framed out a front window.

About 300 volunteers, including Carter, renovated houses in Baltimore and Annapolis Tuesday as part of a weeklong project with Habitat for Humanity, the home-building organization that owes its visibility to Carter, who became heavily involved in its operations after his presidency ended.

Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, are travelling to Maryland; Washington; Birmingham, Ala.; and Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., to work on 86 homes, a number that commemorates his 86th birthday, which he celebrated Friday.

Carter wore jeans and a tool belt as he measured and sawed wood alongside volunteers who raised donations for the privilege of working by his side in Baltimore's McElderry Park neighborhood. Earlier in the day, he helped at houses on Clay Street in Annapolis.

The Maryland visit came days after Carter was hospitalized in Cleveland because of a one-day bout with a gastrointestinal virus, garnering concern from across the globe. In an interview, Carter said he had fully recovered. "Everybody has a virus now and then," he said.

A Naval Academy graduate, Carter shared memories of Baltimore and noted that the city has made major strides.

Baltimore, along with San Diego and Pittsburgh, was one of three cities he visited decades ago as a young naval officer that "were kind of disgraceful," Carter said. Now, all boast cleaner rivers and harbors, and other environmental improvements. "I have a feeling about Baltimore, a feeling of great pride in the accomplishments to date," he said.

In its earlier years, Habitat volunteers built homes from the ground up for needy families. More recently, the group has worked to combat the effects of the recession through a "neighborhood revitalization" initiative that focuses on homes that are vacant as a result of foreclosure.

"These empty homes really do pull down neighborhoods," said Jonathan T.M. Reckford, CEO of Habitat for Humanity International.

Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake has purchased 20 foreclosed homes and has 10 under contract, said CEO Mike Mitchell.

Since 1982, the organization — Maryland's largest — has produced 288 homes, he said. It completes a larger number of homes each year. The group expects to complete 42 projects this year, up from 32 the previous year. Mitchell estimated his chapter was among the top 25 in house production among the 1,600 in the United States.

Qualifying homeowners commit to putting in up to 300 "sweat equity" hours on Habitat homes and attend 50 hours of classes through the group's "Homebuyers College." Habitat sells the homes for their appraised value — usually about \$100,000. The homeowners take on interest-free mortgage loans; their monthly payment is around \$500, Mitchell said.

In Maryland, Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake had raised nearly \$800,000 so far for the efforts in Baltimore and Annapolis, said marketing manager Christopher Falkenhagen. Individuals had to pledge \$1,000 each to participate Tuesday with Carter, or \$500 to participate another day in the weeklong project.

Jane Cassidy, 49, of Catonsville, had raised \$1,050 to be on-site in Baltimore. She said she's participated in Habitat builds in the past but this event had an added bonus: the chance to interact with Carter, a man she's wanted to meet since high school.

To raise the money, "I e-mailed all my friends, my family," she said. "I hit everybody up."

Carter greeted future Habitat homeowners of the 2400 block of Jefferson St. and gave each of them a Bible signed by him and his wife. "I'm going to treasure it," said Butts, who will live in the house with her 4-year-old daughter, TyTiana.

Cynthia Gross, a member of the Monument McElderry Fayette Revitalization Plan board, welcomed Butts to the community.

"I'm excited to meet all my new neighbors," Gross said.

For years, the area was "the hole in the doughnut", said Ernest Smith, co-chairman of the plan board. Nearby neighborhoods were being redeveloped, but not between Washington Street, Monument Street, Fayette Street and Linwood Avenue. Even the industrial areas to the east were reinvestment sites.

The group has been working with Habitat for four years, he said. Just three years ago, only two homeowners lived on the 2400 block — the rest were vacant, he said. But soon, 32 of 43 houses on the block will be owner-occupied, he said.

"That is what we have been fighting to achieve," Smith said.

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