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Jimmy Carter visits Clay Street Habitat project

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It was swift and well orchestrated - yet inspiring for scores of volunteers, residents and, more importantly, the future homeowners.

Former president Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, visited Annapolis yesterday, bestowing Bibles and encouragement to those building Habitat for Humanity homes in the Clay Street neighborhood.

"Oh my Lord, oh my. Thank you. This is something," cried Beatrice P. Smith, who was "having a moment" after Carter gave her a hug and a kiss and posed for a photo. And she isn't even one of those who will move into a new house come spring.

The Carters' stop in Annapolis was part of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project 2010, which has taken the former White House residents to Annapolis, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, among other cities.

They will help to build or restore 86 homes this year in honor of Carter's 86th birthday, which he celebrated Friday.

"It has been an honor for Rosalynn and me to work alongside so many dedicated Habitat volunteers and partner families over the years," said Carter in a statement released by Habitat for Humanity. "By joining together, we can build better communities and change lives around the world - including our own."

It was more personal during his stop in Annapolis.

"How are you? Are you satisfied with the work done?" he asked family members and volunteers.

The Carters posed for pictures with each family and presented them with a Bible, signed by both of them.

"I am jealous of this Bible, it's nicer than mine," he said.

At another stop, he quipped, "OK, y'all back to work now."

Before the Carters arrived around 8:30 a.m., police and Secret Service were already on the street, as construction teams readied their work sites.

Then came the order to gather in formation.

"The president is running a little early." the site supervisor bellowed.

Still, they waited. A small crowd gathered across the corner of Clay Street. Other neighbors peered over from their porches or doorways.

An SUV pulled up and Carter got out, wearing a baseball cap, jeans and tennis shoes. Mrs. Carter, like her husband, wore a tan Habitat for Humanity jacket.

After a few words from Mayor Josh Cohen and County Executive John R. Leopold, the Carters started their procession from one group of volunteers and homeowners to another.

Many asked about the president's health. He spent two days in the hospital last week with a stomach virus. Others wished him a belated happy birthday.

"I have heard the worst singing this week," he said.

Inspiration

The visit meant more than photo opportunities for those personally involved.

"Oh yes. It is a day that I have dreamed of. I could not sleep," Wanda Mitchell said. "To be getting a Habitat home, then have President Carter hand me a Bible. It is like icing on the cake."

Gail and Barrington Allen are looking forward to moving into their Clay Street home come spring.

Yesterday, spring came early.

"It is a wonderful day, a new beginning," Barrington Allen said.

Jayna Powell, a spokesman for Chesapeake Habitat for Humanity, underscored the moment for homeowners.

"They could not sleep. It was like they were walking on air," she said. "And then to know President and Mrs. Carter has stepped on their threshold ... it's something. It's pretty cool."

She said the volunteers working on homes this week were not just giving their time.

"All these volunteers paid to work this week," she said. "They had to raise money to work."

The Carter work week will help raise money for Habitat's national efforts, too. But having Carter around brings a certain weight to Habitat.

"It also lets the governor, mayor, county executive know we need houses, properties for these families," Powell said.

The Baltimore-based regional Habitat chapter has built more than 285 homes so far. Between 1999 and 2007, it built or rehabbed 12 homes in the Clay Street neighborhood. The Housing Authority of Annapolis agreed to have Habitat build 10 units where old public housing stood.

After the Carters left for their Baltimore project, the Clay Street site burst into a cacophony of banging, drilling, and nail-gun popping. Teams lined up, bent at the knees, then hoisted one side wall, then another.

"Our affiliate was picked from over 1,600 others," Powell said. "That is because we transform neighborhoods, communities. That is what we do."

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