

Jimmy Carter visits Annapolis Habitat project

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Former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, swept through Annapolis yesterday, bestowing Bibles, good cheer and encouragement to those building Habitat for Humanity homes in the Clay Street neighborhood.

It was swift, well orchestrated, yet inspiring for scores of volunteers, the 10 soon-to-be households and area residents.

"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 that will take the former White House residents to six cities: Annapolis, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., and Birmingham, Ala.

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

"I has been an honor for Rosalynn and me to work alongside so many dedicated Habitat volunteers and partner families over the years," Carter, a Naval Academy graduate, said 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."

During his stop in Annapolis, it was more personal, though he did repeat many of the greetings as he met with each family and the squad of volunteers.

"How are you? Are you satisfied with the work done yesterday?" he asked more than one group.

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

Carter's humor was evident as well.

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

At more than one stop, after the photo was taken, he quipped, "OK, y'all, back to work now."

Before the Carters arrived around 8:30 a.m. anticipation filled the air. Police and Secret Service manned the street, groups of well wishers milled about and construction teams readied their work sites.

Then the order came to gather in formation.

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

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

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

After a few words with community leaders like Mayor Josh Cohen, County Executive John R. Leopold - who got to the president as soon as he was out of his limo - and Habitat brass, the Carters started their procession from one pod of volunteers and homeowners to another. Chat and pose, chat and pose.

Many asked of the president's health. He spent two days in the hospital last week with a stomach virus.

"Thank you. I'm fine," he said.

Others wished him a belated happy birthday. He thanked them too, then quipped, "I have heard the worst singing this week."

Inspiration.

But for those involved, the visit meant more than a photo op and small talk.

"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."

Jayna Powell, a spokesman for Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake, 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 have stepped on their threshold ... it's something. It's pretty cool."

She also noted that the volunteers at work 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. That is one reason Jimmy Carter is so important to Habitat."

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 over 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.

"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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