

Pasadena family comes home thanks to Habitat

American dream comes true for Gutierrezes

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More than a decade ago, two immigrants from El Salvador came to the United States searching for a better life.

Now, their own version of the American dream has finally come true. Jose and Patricia Gutierrez, along with their four children, will receive the keys today to a three-story row house on Stoll Street in Brooklyn, just over the county line.

The Gutierrez family, who have lived in a small one-story house off Edwin Raynor Boulevard in Pasadena for four years, got the home through Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake.

It's the 288th home the charity has dedicated. Habitat builds and renovates homes for low- to moderate-income families, who then purchase them through interest-free loans. One of the organization's main projects has been in Brooklyn, where dozens of Habitat families, many from Anne Arundel, now live.

"They'll each have their own room," Patricia Gutierrez said, looking at her children with pride.

It will be the first time that 9-year-old Ivan, 6-year-old David and twins Adriana and Vilma, 3, will have their own space. The Brooklyn house has five bedrooms, and Patricia Gutierrez said Habitat workers chose that home for the family because it was so large.

"It is very exciting," she said, two days before the family's move-in date. "You see the papers to the house and you can believe it. I can't wait."

The older children are a little more apprehensive because they don't want to leave their friends at Sunset Elementary, she said. But the Gutierrezes feel this is the right thing for their family.

"We're not doing this for us. We're doing it for our kids," Patricia said as she packed up their belongings.

A perfect fit.

The Gutierrez family was the perfect fit for Habitat for several reasons, said Anne Rouse, director of family services for Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake.

"They are extremely hard-working," she said.

Plus, Habitat tends to look for families who are "doubled up" - either staying with other families or crowded into tiny living spaces. The Gutierrez children didn't have much room in the Pasadena house, with the boys in one bedroom and the girls in another.

"This gives them the opportunity to have a home of their own and just live together as a family," Rouse said. "It really is the American dream."

Patricia, 29, came to the United States in 1997 with her father. Her mom and stepfather remained in El Salvador.

"My dad got the papers," she said. "We wanted a better life."

She spoke no English, but picked it up quickly when she began taking high school classes in Montgomery County.

"It was hard, but I got good grades," she said.

Several years later, she met Jose, who immigrated in 1996, at her Silver Spring church. They married in 2000 and started a family soon afterwards.

As their family grew, so did the need for more space. The apartment they were renting in Silver Spring just wasn't big enough.

Four years ago, they moved into the Pasadena house, which is owned by Jose's boss at a Montgomery County construction company. He charges them \$850 in rent for the three-bedroom abode, plus utilities, Patricia said.

The mortgage on the Habitat house is \$450.

Patricia answered quickly when asked what the family would do with the money they'll save.

"Send it home to our families in El Salvador," she said.

"You've got to help a little bit," her husband added.

Jose, 30, said he never thought he'd be able to buy his own home.

"I'm so happy to be moving in," he said.

The Gutierrezes learned of Habitat for Humanity about three years ago, when Patricia enrolled David in a Head Start program at Freetown Elementary. She told a staff member who was assisting her family that she and her husband wanted to find an affordable house to buy.

"The houses are so expensive, and I cannot work because I have such a big family," she said.

But when staffers told her about Habitat for Humanity, she felt hopeful.

"We talked about it and we prayed about it," she said.

In the end, "God gave it to us," she said. "He answered our prayers."

Habitat requires its homeowners to put in their own "sweat equity" on their houses, and Jose put in more than 200 hours of labor fixing up their future home.

"He worked very hard," his wife said.

Rouse said Habitat volunteers are used to homeowners who don't know much about construction. Jose, a mason, knew what he was doing.

"They were just overjoyed with him," Rouse said.

Patricia said the family will be joined today by dozens of friends from their church, as well as her dad, who still lives in Silver Spring.

"He can't believe it," she said. Neither can her mother back in El Salvador, whom she still talks to nearly every day. "No one can believe it," she said.

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