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Rebuilding Macon's director finds value in fixing up houses

Debra Rollins is never quite sure who is going to call her Rebuilding Macon office on a rainy Tuesday afternoon.

But she knows who won't.

"The reason they are not going to call is because we've already fixed their roof," she said. "It isn't leaking any more."

From roofs to foundations, handrails to kitchen cabinets, the proof is in the putting.

This is National Volunteer Week. On Thursday, about 350 youths from the Future Farmers of America state convention in Macon will join local high school students from Mount de Sales Academy to fix up five houses as part of the Rebuilding Macon efforts.

Then, on Saturday, the pounding of hammers, buzzing of saws and swishing of paintbrushes will continue with Rebuilding Macon's marquee annual event.

More than 1,500 tough-as-nails volunteers from area churches and businesses will descend on 40 chosen houses. The volunteers will be armed with 1,200 gallons of paint and five dozen pieces of Sheetrock to replace ceilings and walls.

The number of houses is down from previous years, but only because 80 homes already have been repaired since January. And somewhere in that mix of 40 will be the landmark 2,000th house since the organization was formed in 1992.

It took 14 years to fix the first 1,000 houses, only four to repair the last 1,000. Rebuilding Macon has now morphed into so many year-round projects it could be called Reloading Macon.

This spring, 11 houses were repaired by church youth groups as part of their March Mission Madness. College student volunteers from

University of Miami (Ohio) and Boston University both came during their spring breaks.

At different times this summer, about 1,400 youths will swoop into the community to lend a helping hand as part of church camps.

And every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, a local adult group called the Good Samaritans shows up at the Rebuilding Macon office on Lake Street, ready for assignments to repair leaky sinks and hammer porches back together.

Debra has been executive director for 12 years. She never has to ask herself why she does what she does. Every day brings a new affirmation.

“It’s the best helping the best,” she said. “You have a 70-year-old woman, who bought a house working for minimum wage, and the president of a bank on a ladder helping her fix it. There are people who have worked hard all their lives being helped by people who are doing things for them they would pay to have done on their own.”

One morning, Debra went to take a photograph of a wheelchair ramp her volunteers had built for a woman the day before. “When I got there, I noticed tracks from her wheelchair in the dew on the grass,” said Debra. “She was already out hanging her laundry.

“It’s not just about home improvement. It’s improving the quality of people’s lives.”

Debra may not have been born with a circular saw in her hand, but she certainly graduated from the old-school philosophy of “measure twice, cut once.”

Her father, the late Alton Waller, was a homebuilder in Warner Robins. To celebrate her 12th birthday, he took her with him to a house and demonstrated the inner workings of a toilet.

Her life hit some turbulence in the mid-1990s. She went through a divorce and sold the two Dunkin’ Donuts franchises she owned in Macon.

As part of her self-prescribed therapy, she immersed herself in volunteer work. She tutored for Goodwill. She worked the phones at

Crisis Line. And she got involved with Christmas in April, which later became Rebuilding Together and is now known as Rebuilding Macon. She was named the organization's first full-time director in 1998.

"I found some value in my life," she said. "Before, it was always about the money."

Although TV reality shows such as "Extreme Makeover" have increased public awareness, that's not necessarily a good thing. The episodes are often unrealistic and over the top. Too much glitter in that spackling compound.

"They will sometimes spend a million dollars on one house," Debra said. "Some people think we're going to go in and do the same thing for them. The money spent on one house could fund my program for several years."

Sure, some of the work is cosmetic. And Band-Aids can't pretend to stop all the bleeding or mend a broken arm.

But people feel better about themselves when there is a sense of pride in where they live. A new coat of paint can go a long way.

Said Debra: "Everybody sleeps better at night."

When the college group from Miami of Ohio departed after spring break, they presented Debra with a glass signed by each student.

At the bottom was an inscription:

Macon a Difference.

Debra said it may even become the organization's new motto.

There's nothing better than truth in advertising.