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FINAL WEEKEND!
2006 Fall Festival of Homes
No Payments for 6 months!
See inside cover for details

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By Kathleen Kochanski

Welcome *mat*

Rebuilding Together Summit County

Since 1995, an organization called Rebuilding Together Summit County has been quietly and effectively improving the quality of life for low-income homeowners who are elderly or disabled. More than 420 homeowners have been served to date. Currently, 59 are on the list to receive services, which are provided for free for eligible recipients.

The name of the organization says it all. The "Rebuilding" part refers to the repair and rehabilitation aspects of the program. Rebuilding Together Summit County does not construct new homes. Rather, volunteers work with existing homes to make them warm, safe and dry. In so doing, they give gifts of independence and dignity to the homeowners they serve.

The "Together" part of the organization's name refers to the volunteer corps of businesses, organizations and individuals who make it all possible. Paul Holm, executive director, works in partnership with the city of Akron, Summit County and other local government entities. He works with local businesses, trade unions, civic clubs, churches and student groups, putting together the right mix of skill sets to get each job done.

What drives him? "I was looking to make a difference," he said. Now in his third year as executive director, he moved here from Indiana to care for aging parents on both sides of his family. Little did he know that he'd be caring for aging adults countywide. Making a difference he is.

Holm said he is grateful for the financial support he receives and the time and talent of volunteers. The Home Builders Association Serving Portage and Summit Counties is one of several organizations that adopts a house each year. The HBA also adopted and remodeled the home that now serves as the office of Rebuilding Together. When it became apparent that the home needed serious renovation, the HBA went to its members, asking for and receiving a new roof, air

conditioning, carpeting and other major improvements.

The Akron Area Board of Realtors adopts a house each year. About 30 to 40 Realtors, their families and friends gather on a designated weekend in April and blitz through repairs, painting, cleaning and other routine maintenance tasks that are anything but routine for the elderly or disabled.

Howard Hanna Smythe Cramer also adopts a house. That keeps Bill Askin, who is president of the company and of AABOR, doubly involved in Rebuilding Together. He began volunteering in 1998, serving as a house captain from 1999 to 2000 at the suggestion of Fred Zumpano, HBA president.

"What better way for Realtors to give back to the community?" Askin said. "Rebuilding Together is a great organization that gives us a wonderful way to improve the quality of life in our community. Making homes safer and more comfortable has a wonderful effect on the residents."

Besides adopting a house each year, AABOR regularly provides home inspections and conducts an annual golf outing, splitting the proceeds between Rebuilding Together Summit County and Habitat for Humanity.

Other volunteers include Westminster Presbyterian, which pulls together a volunteer crew once a month. Today, University of Akron students participating in Make a Difference Day are helping a homeowner in south Akron get ready for the winter ahead. Yard work, minor exterior and interior repairs and storm windows are just a few of the chores on their to-do list.

In addition to a variety of one-day blitzes scheduled throughout the year, Rebuilding Together helps homeowners year-round through its Senior Home Modification program. That's where the organization could use more help. Right now, three part-time volunteers juggle the entire workload. Volunteer coordinator Gary Edwards, 69, gives two full days a week to the effort, working

with two other retirees, who each volunteer one day a week.

Edwards formerly supervised the skilled trades at Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. "I learned so much from the electricians, pipe fitters, machinists, maintenance staff and sheet metal workers," he said.

Since last April, he's been putting that industrial experience to good use in the residential setting. He and his crew just finished a three-day job for a 47-year-old gentleman who is blind. Among other improvements, the volunteers put in a battery-operated sump pump as a backup to the existing electrical unit; caulked and foamed the basement windows; installed a dead bolt on the back door; put in smoke alarms; added two new lights out front; installed a railing for the front steps; redid stone and brickwork on the front of the house; repaired a crack in the cement floor of the sunroom; and installed grab bars in the bathroom.

"The work is very rewarding," said Edwards. "I like doing things with my hands, and I needed to fill my time." Doing something for somebody else seemed like a good way to put the two together, he said. "What we do helps people stay warm, safe and dry in their homes. That's what we're trying to address."

Although it's helpful when volunteers have some knowledge of tools, it is not a prerequisite for volunteering, said Edwards. He and his team are willing to help anyone learn. "We do not do any major installations," he said, "just routine home maintenance."

Good physical health is important, too. "We go up and down the stairs a lot," said Edwards.

"You work hard as a volunteer, but you end up building camaraderie and having fun while doing something good," said Holm.

The organization's Web site has detailed information about the program, including eligibility requirements, forms for applying for assistance and sign-up forms for volunteers. Visit www.rebuildingtogether-sc.org

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