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Habitat Program Restores Low-Income Homes



Jesse Alvarez (front), Stephanie Cervantes (center) and Miranda Di Stefano, employees of South Bay-based Architectural Mailboxes, were part of a volunteer crew that provided recent repairs --- as well as a complementary mailbox --- cost-free to a home in L.A.'s Jefferson Park neighborhood. The effort was part of A Brush With Kindness, a new low-income home improvement program through the nonprofit Habitat for Humanity of Greater Los Angeles. Photo courtesy of Architectural Mailboxes

By Erik Derr

Chris Farentinos learned from nearly 10 years working for Mattel, Inc. that life isn't always fun and games. It's also about reaching out to those in need. Farentinos, an engineering manager for the company, often joined fellow employees in volunteering with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity, the international nonprofit that builds and provides houses and other living essentials to families in need. The profile of the organization rose dramatically in the mid-1980s after former President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn got involved. Farentinos says his entire department at times would report to a Habitat building site, pick up hammers and nails or whatever other tools were needed and devote their energy toward making home ownership a reality for someone else.

Recent data collected by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority suggests there are upwards of 43,000 homeless in Los Angeles County. Of those, it's believed 33 percent have some kind of shelter while 67 percent have none. Further statistics from the Habitat organization shows an estimated 95 million Americans --- one of every three families --- face some form of housing hardship, such as lack of sufficient income, overcrowding or poor quality shelter.

Since its founding in the late 1960s, Habitat has built more than 300,000 houses, sheltering more than 1.5 million people in more than 3,000 communities worldwide. In the Greater Los Angeles area, the group attracts over an average of about 400 volunteers per month. Habitat has spearheaded several house building projects in the South Bay over the years.

"It's all about refocusing yourself on bigger things in life, on meeting new people, on making the needs of others a priority," said Farentinos. "Then, you carry those experiences back with you." Farentinos held on to that spirit of community service when he left Mattel to start a business with his wife, Vanessa Troyer, in 2000. So about three years later, after Architectural Mailboxes, the couple's custom-designed mailbox operation, got off the ground --- or, started delivering, as it were, Farentinos was back lending his hands to another Habitat project. And his wife and all their employees joined him. "It seems to me, it's pretty rare for a small company to do this," said Troyer, who employs a staff of about seven. "Mattel had it set up the same way...only they didn't close down the entire company like we do; just a department."

About two years ago, Habitat organizers

See Habitat, page 13



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