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News

Home makeover

(continued from page 1)

ton could stay in the house. And the nonprofit Davidson Housing Coalition's Marcia Webster and Zach Jakob tried for years to help Covington. The nonprofit agency's HAMMERS program has a \$5,000 limit for repairs per home, and Covington needed much, much more. Local churches have offered to contribute a few thousand more, but there was never enough.

Until Jim Burbank called one day this fall. Despite the worst year he could remember for homebuilders, Burbank, co-owner of Saussy Burbank, was determined to keep alive a relatively new tradition for his company to repair a needy person's home each fall in time for Christmas.

Webster said Friday that Burbank was probably her last chance to help Covington before he was forced to leave his home.

When Webster and Jakob took Burbank to the crumbling house at 343 Delburg St., "he never blinked," Webster said.

On Dec. 11, standing in Covington's freshly painted and heated living room, Webster said Burbank and his company accomplished something "unprecedented" for the housing coalition, the family and community.

Burbank is much more modest. He said he couldn't have done anything without the support of JCB Urban, another Burbank company, Burbank's construction manager, and about two dozen other subcontractors and suppliers.

Together, more than 100 people worked on Covington's home for three months, all but rebuilding it from the ground up. All the plumbing and electrical wiring are new, as well as the heating and air conditioning system (Covington never had air conditioning before). Half of the house needed a new floor and sub-floor, and the other half needed repairs. New, insulated drywall has replaced the old paneling. The house has new, easy-maintenance linoleum flooring throughout.

All the kitchen appliances and fixtures are new, as well as "the star of the show, a Gerber elongated commode," to replace his Davidson-issued portable toilet, Burbank said.

Sitting on his front porch before the gathering, Covington said his house had been "about to fall down." And seeing it now, "I just can't believe it," he said. "It's great."

"When we asked people to help out, they came through in a big way," Burbank said. He estimated that the renovation project would have cost \$35,000 to \$40,000, but most of the equipment and labor were donated for the project.

Burbank and Webster also credited the town of Davidson, led by Planning Director Kris Krider; the Mecklenburg County Building Department, which expedited the inspections; and Duke Energy, which

arranged to get power back to the house.

Standing at the back of the crowd listening Friday morning was Larry Ussery.

Ussery and Benny Covington have been friends all their lives, and he may remember more about Covington than Covington does. They went to school together where Covington was on the A honor roll, Ussery recalled Friday. But Covington developed a brain tumor in the 11th grade. An operation saved his life but left him without the full use of his mind and one of his arms.

But that didn't change their friendship. Despite his disability, Benny worked 28 years at Templon Mills without missing a day, Ussery recalled with pride. Ussery and his wife, Pam, bought their house on Delburg Street in 1962 or '63, and Benny bought the one next to them a year later.

Ussery and his wife watched as Benny's house slowly fell into ruin because Benny couldn't afford repairs.

And finally, three years ago, Ussery and his wife knew they had to do something. He told officials at the town of Davidson that Benny Covington needed help. They pointed Ussery to Webster, the housing coalition director, and Webster set the gears in motion.

"I try to look after him," Ussery said.

When the construction crews moved into Covington's home three months ago, he went to live with his other sister, Nancy, in Mooresville.

"This has been an amazing experience for me to come here almost daily to see this work done," Jakob, director of the HAMMERS program, said as he stood in the doorway of Covington's new bathroom.

Standing in Covington's newly minted bedroom, Krider, praised the work of the Housing Coalition and the HAMMERS program for repairing houses so many people can remain in their homes. "Delburg Street is like other streets in town - former mill houses that might look OK from the outside, but need a lot of work inside," Krider said.

Webster didn't plan it this way, but Covington's house - the agency's single biggest repair project - is also the agency's 100th project.

She praised Krider and other Davidson officials for their care. "I don't think there's another town you could live in that would be as welcoming to this process, in allowing someone like Benny to retain his home," she said.

Krider "could have put tape out there around the house and said this house couldn't be saved," Webster said. "Kris deserves a lot of credit. Thank you for not putting up that yellow tape."

Earlier, to those gathered in Covington's living room, Webster said, "It's been a long three years, but we're glad to bring Benny home today. All of you, thank you very much." □

Who helped Benny?

Businesses and organization that contributed to renovation of Benny Covington's house were: JCB Urban, Saussy Burbank, Builders First Source, Jose Hernandez Framing, Parks Heating and Cooling, Price Brothers, Action Electric, Hunter Millwork, Total Siding, Frank Murray, MASCO, Lightstyles, Elite Flooring & Design, Atlas Painting and Drywall, Austin Insulation, Broadway Commercial Services, Todd White Construction, town of Davidson, Charlotte Regional Realtors Association, Total Bond Veterinary, Clinic at Davidson, Mecklenburg County Building Code Enforcement, Rafelis family, Davidson Furniture Outlet, JDJohnson's Furniture Deliveries and Moves, Life Fellowship Church, Phi Delta Theta Fraternity, Davidson College and Lowe's of Huntersville.

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