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Volunteers build home in a day for Wabasso's 'Big Mama'

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WEST WABASSO — Rome wasn't built in a day.

But Big Mama's house was.

Hundreds of good-hearted volunteers labored in the hot sun Saturday to do something that is rarely accomplished in the home-building industry.

They built a new home for Margaret "Big Mama" Brown in less than 24 hours, mainly as a way to keep the 62-year-old Brown from becoming homeless once her right to a FEMA trailer expires.

The workers — electricians, plumbers, roofers, drywall installers, etc. — donated their time as a way of thanking Brown for serving her community by providing a safe haven for youths who use her yard as a playground.

About 6 a.m. Saturday, work crews converged at Brown's home site, 6370 87th Lane, near County Road 510. The foundation had been poured previously, and the exterior walls went up Friday night in anticipation of rain Saturday.

County building inspectors approved the work as it went on.

Around noon, Indian River County building contractor Joe Telese handed Brown an oversized mortgage document for the home.

Cheers erupted from the crowd of workers as Big Mama tearfully tore the document to pieces.

Telese's company, Regatta Construction LLC, and his subcontractors built the 1,300-square-foot wood-frame house, valued at \$115,000, free of charge. Brown, whose home was torn down after hurricanes Jeanne and Francis left it uninhabitable, had been living in a FEMA trailer for a year.

Brown received the keys to her new home about 8:15 p.m. and proclaimed, "This is truly a miracle."

Then she began singing "Amazing Grace." The others joined in.

"Everyone working here today has blessed me," Brown said. "I'm so happy to be out of that trailer."

Brown's new home was the culmination of a project launched more than two years ago by Julianne Price, an environmental specialist with the Indian River County Health Department, and Sheriff's Detective Teddy Floyd, who worked together to assess the needs of West Wabasso neighborhoods.

"When we first walked through here, Big Mama was sitting on the porch and there were about 15 kids playing basketball in the front yard," Price recalled.

"Big Mama is a good example of being a pillar of the community. She played an important role in the community by watching over all those kids."

Floyd, who works with the Sheriff's Community Policing Division, said of Brown: "She reaped good seeds. Now she is reaping what she sowed."

Brown is a former custodian for the Indian River County School District, who also worked packing tomatoes and cucumbers. She had to stop working after suffering a heart attack and a stroke, said her daughter, Justine Peynado.

Brown, who was born in her West Wabasso home, said she always allowed youths to play basketball and football in her yard, mainly because there are not many options for them.

"I love children," Brown said. "My mother did the same thing for children in the neighborhood."

Because Brown faced eviction from the FEMA trailer Sept. 26, Price and Floyd sought help from Port St. Lucie building official Joel Dramis, who leads a local chapter of World Changers, a Baptist youth group that helps repair aging houses throughout the country.

Dramis and Telese have teamed up since 1991 to repair or build homes for needy residents in Fort Pierce, Gifford, Florida City and other locations.

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