

The 'Extreme' Treatment

By JOANN KLIMKIEWICZ | The Hartford Courant

Throngs of sweating spectators gathered along Hollister Avenue Wednesday, begging the driver, "Move that bus!"

Here in the city's gritty East End, the hulking trailer concealed from their view the lavish new home they had waited hours under the boiling sun to see. Now they were ready to get a peek at what beauty replaced the crumbling gray building Gloria Brown and her three children had called home just six days before.

Then, out from a black stretch limo rushed the Brown family, ready themselves for whatever homebuilding magic the ABC tearjerker, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" had done for them. And then, they got back in the limo and did it again.

Only, it wasn't the Browns. Just a rehearsal stand-in for the family that would arrive hours later.

"You know, that's Hollywood," said Janet Arrington, 43, a neighborhood resident volunteering at the information booth, where the most sought after tidbit seemed to be "Where's Ty?" – as in the show's hunky host, Ty Pennington.

Arrington was one of thousands of local volunteers -- from skilled labor to support staff to supplies and décor companies -- who descended on the block last week to make the single mother's dream family home a reality. Brown and her three teenage children were chosen as Connecticut's first "Extreme" build by producers of the show, known for its dramatic, down-to-the-wire home reconstructions for families in desperate need. All done around the clock, all by the hands of local volunteers.

"Oh, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful," sang volunteer and neighborhood native Toby Bish, 65, leaning over a barricade within view of the new two-story, modern Victorian. He looked up at the slate blue construction, dotted with expansive windows, capped at the front with a rounded porch and a white picket fence.

"This is like a miracle on 34th Street, only it's a miracle on Hollister Avenue," said Bish, cradling two paint brushes in hand. And the inside? "Oh, it's awesome. Stainless steel, polished granite, fireplace in the master bedroom."

"They really deserve this," he said of the family, sent off on a California getaway while crews toiled on the home, turning a few street blocks into a buzzing all-hours village. "This is a tough, tough neighborhood. But [Gloria] has helped so many people out. She'll feed anybody coming through the door."

So now, he figures, it's their turn to give her a hand.

Pastor of the English Chapel Cathedral of Miracles, Gloria Brown bought the modest fixer-upper on Hollister after moving her family out of the Terrace Circle housing project.

They were thrilled for a new start, she and her daughters Bobbi, 17, and Janae, 14, and son, Fred, 16. All were active in the community beyond their church activities, with Brown founding an annual community festival, the kids hosting a youth-oriented radio show, and Bobbi becoming youth president of the local NAACP. But a string of misfortunes came knocking.

First, a flood battered the home. Then it was nearly destroyed in a fire ignited when a few neighborhood kids set off careless fireworks. The family escaped alive, with mom suffering burns to her chest. It could have been worse, had Fred not broken in the door that had trapped her

inside.

After the fire, a series of robberies stripped the home of most of its valuables, leaving the Browns to temporarily rent a nearby apartment as they considered their next step.

The next step, it turns out, was Ty Pennington and his band of volunteers.

Earlier this summer, the show contacted Gulick Associates LLC, a New Canaan construction firm, and **Danbury architect Leigh Overland** to volunteer their services. Both agreed, but didn't quite know what they'd be in for. They would have to do in weeks the work that normally takes months. Gulick amassed a team of local companies willing to donate labor and supplies, while Overland drew up designs and headed down to the city hall building department to get permits for their super-secret project.

"Everything about this house is extreme," Overland said Wednesday, standing across the street of the new home, waiting with the masses for the Browns' arrival. He wouldn't divulge specifics of the interior -- that will be revealed when the show is broadcast next season. He'd only say the home is several thousand square feet and designed to be a safe, warm space for the family -- "A framework for a wonderful life." The new house is equipped with an alarm system, and the crew also spruced up the lawns and porches of neighboring homes.

There were a few hiccups along the way, with the crew falling behind schedule and some workers having to bow out on account of heat exhaustion. At about 3 a.m. Tuesday, Overland started to worry. But it all came together, with the help of a fresh crop of volunteers who came knocking at 285 Hollister.

It all overwhelmed Michael Gulick, co-owner of the construction firm. Standing in the heat, sun-drained, sleep-deprived and unshaven, he said the experience was one he could never put into words. "That all these people came out to help -- it's just been a blessing to witness that and be a part of it. And they didn't do it for the fame, that didn't do it for the TV show. They did it for this family."

And when the clock read 7 p.m., the crowd still chanted the show's signature order to, "Move that bus!" They hooted and snapped pictures at the sight of Pennington, and hollered louder when they saw that same stretch limo pull up. This time, it carried the real Brown family.

Move that bus!

This time, the driver listened. The bus rolled forward, revealing the picture-perfect home. Gloria Brown collapsed into Pennington's arms. The girls fell to the ground. Fred did a back flip.

This time, they only needed one take.