



Menasha School District, AZCO involved in Habitat for Humanity collaboration

BY MICHAEL KING • POST-CRESCENT STAFF WRITER • JANUARY 25, 2011

MENASHA — Eleven years after leaving Guatemala and starting a new life for her family in the United States, Blanca Juarez is living the American dream.

And thanks to Greater Fox Cities Area Habitat for Humanity, AZCO Inc. and Menasha High School, Juarez and her family also have a place to call home.

Juarez, her mother, her younger brother and her 9-year-old son moved into their new four-bedroom, one bath ranch home at 205 Kaukauna St. last month. It was home No. 131 built by the local Habitat chapter with collaboration from volunteers at AZCO, a Menasha construction firm, and about 20 students from a Menasha High School construction trades class.

“We all have our own room, a nice bathroom, a nice kitchen,” said Juarez, who previously had been sharing a bedroom with her son in the cluttered basement of a relative’s home.

The Juarez home is the fourth Habitat project completed by Menasha High School’s construction trades students, including the last three co-sponsored by AZCO, which provides the financing the district cannot take on.

“Our kids are involved from the dig all the way to the dedication,” said Menasha High School Principal Larry Haase. “AZCO’s benevolence allows us to get involved.”

Steven Thomaschefsky, Menasha High School’s technology and engineering department head, said the knowledge students gain on the job site far exceeds what they can learn inside a classroom.

“It’s nice to have the kids on site instead of just in the classroom,” Thomaschefsky said. “They learn so much more on site.”

Seeing the finished product was a proud moment for sophomore Jon Sanchez.

“The house looks nice,” said Sanchez, 15. “I’m proud to say I worked there and help (build) it.”

Junior Jacob Sell, who wants to become an electrician someday, is pleased to have played a role in the project. He had an opportunity to meet Juarez at the job site.

“When we put up the Styrofoam on the outside for the walls, (Juarez) was there helping me along because she knew how to do that,” Sell said. “She was glad Habitat and Menasha High teamed up and we got this done for her.”

Juarez, 32, has worked full time for five years at a Neenah plastics firm. The single mother said traditional home ownership would have been almost impossible for her and is grateful for the Habitat program, calling it a huge help for lower-income families.

Eileen Daly, Habitat’s family services manager, said the demand for affordable housing has increased in the last two or three years. At a quarterly Habitat home ownership application meeting earlier this month, 45 families showed up — compared with 14 families at the same meeting in January 2010.

“The economics have just forced families to look for better options outside of the rental market,” Daly said. “Families are desperate to find something affordable so that they can buy groceries and gasoline in the same week.”

John Weyenberg, Habitat executive director-president, said all Habitat owners make a small down payment, contribute 300 to 500 hours of sweat equity and make monthly, zero interest mortgage payments on their new homes. They also take classes in financial management, home maintenance and landscaping.

Juarez already has a list of home improvement projects she hopes to undertake.

“We have all the plumbing ready for a second bathroom in the basement, but I have to work on it,” she said, noting the home’s one bathroom gets crowded at times. “That’s my next project.”

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