

Montana SAF Leads Habitat for Humanity “Blitz Build”

By Scott Kuehn

In 2000, the Montana SAF teamed up with the Missoula Habitat for Humanity for Missoula’s and SAF’s first Blitz Build of a Habitat for Humanity home. The theme was “Forest for Humanity.” All of the lumber and plywood was donated by Montana mills. With lots and lots of planning and many volunteers, the Montana SAF “blitz built” a home in just three days. The state society received an SAF Foresters Fund grant to produce a half-hour video of the project, starting from harvesting trees on a local tree farm, to milling the logs and plywood, to the three-day Blitz Build.

In western Montana, the fire season of 2000 was exceptionally bad, especially in the Bitterroot Valley. In 2002, the Montana SAF teamed up with the Ravalli County Habitat for Humanity (HfHRC) to blitz build a home made entirely out of wood salvaged from the fires of 2000. The theme was “Forest for Humanity: Up from the Ashes.” Again, with many partners and volunteers, the dried-in home was built in three days.

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It had been a while since that last project, and Montana SAF members wanted to build another home. Gordy Sanders (resource manager at Pyramid Mountain Lumber and past SAF state chair) and I (a forester for Salmon River Wood and past state SAF chair) took the lead on this year’s Blitz Build.

In March 2014, I contacted Mike Kibler, executive director for the Habitat for Humanity of Ravalli County and explained what we were proposing. Mike’s reaction was something like, “You want to do what? You’d do that?”

Gordy and I met with Mike and a few HfHRC board members and explained that we had done this twice before, that the lumber and plywood would be donated, and that we’d help coordinate the three-



The result of the Montana SAF’s Habitat for Humanity Blitz Build: a dried-in house in three days.

day Blitz Build. We picked the third week in October, which is Montana Forest Products Week; the Blitz Build would be the inaugural event for the week.

Gordy Sanders called seven Montana mills to request lumber and plywood donations: Pyramid Mountain Lumber, F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber, Plum Creek Timber, Sun Mountain Lumber, Thompson River Lumber, RY Timber, and Tricon Timber. Throughout the summer, a helper, H.L. Stephenson, and I picked up the lumber and plywood from the mills.

The HfHRC hired Brad and Nancy Pollman, of Turnkey Construction, to be the primary contractors for the home. They dug the foundation, poured the cement slab, and did most of the prepping of the site and materials for the Blitz Build. We also teamed up with the University of Montana’s College of Technology carpentry program. The instructors and students pre-cut and pre-assembled the headers, windows, and door openings.

This is key to a Blitz Build: everything must be pre-cut. Each wall must be pre-measured and all laid out, and then bundled into a package for the project. In a three-day build, you can’t have 60 people standing around waiting for boards to be cut. A week before the build, Brad started lining everything out. Trusses were on-site; the studs, headers, and top and bottom plates for the walls were bundled up; and the wall locations were drawn on the slab. We developed plans A, B, and C, accounting for several construction scenarios. All the materials were onsite: nails, hammers, shingles, windows/doors, sid-

ing, hard hats, food, water, ladders, power cords, levels, saws, forklift, and so much more. We were ready to go.

It reminded me of my mom cooking Thanksgiving dinner. We’d sit down for a great turkey dinner and in 20 minutes, we’d be stuffed. But it took my mom weeks of preparation to prepare for those

during the main part of the build.)

At noon, we took a break for a visit by Montana governor Steve Bullock, Sen. John Walsh, and John Tubbs, director of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Day 2: At 6:30 a.m., Brad, myself, and the pod leaders were busy getting ready for setting the trusses before the other volunteers arrived. By first light, we were setting the gables and trusses; Building Materials Corp. of Missoula donated a boom truck for the task. Setting trusses is dangerous, with lifting overhead and workers on the trusses. This is why we set the trusses before the main group of volunteers showed up. Throughout Saturday those volunteers laid sheathing on the roof, worked on interior walls, and installed windows and doors. On Sunday, we worked on the soffits, siding, and shingles, and finished up the interior work.

By 4:30 p.m. on Sunday, the crews were tired and sore (but in such a good way, no one ever complained), and we



Montana SAF chair Beverly Yelczyn was one of more than 65 volunteers who helped build a Habitat for Humanity home in Missoula in October. Yelczyn is a program staff officer on the Lolo National Forest.

20 minutes. The same is true for a Blitz Build: three days of building was a result of six months of planning and preparation.

At 6 a.m. on Friday, October 17 (still dark out), those six months of planning came together: It was time to start the Blitz.

By 8 a.m., all the volunteers—65 on the first day—had been briefed on safety and the plan for the day, and away we went. Volunteers included members of the local high school Key Club, local businesses, University of Montana Forestry students, College of Technology carpentry students, and local builders, along with others from the community and, of course, SAF members.

One of the other keys to a Blitz Build is having pod leaders: carpenters or other professionals who can show 10 to 15 volunteers what to do and make sure it’s done correctly. By 9 a.m., the first exterior wall was up. By noon, the exterior walls were up. There is nothing like the sound of 40 hammers nailing studs and plywood together at once. (For safety reasons, we don’t allow the use of pneumatic nail guns

called an end to the Blitz Build. We had dried-in a home in three days.

Brad and Nancy Pollman have continued to work on the remainder of the building: wiring, plumbing, sheetrock, painting, etc. The goal is to have new homeowner Lori Call and her 11-year-old daughter, Miranda Rivera, in the home by the holidays. As a Habitat for Humanity “partner,” Call must provide 500 hours of “sweat equity” before moving in, and must provide a small down payment and qualify for a Habitat for Humanity mortgage (for more information, see www.ravallihabitat.org).

A Blitz Build can’t be accomplished without a great partnership with the local Habitat for Humanity, the builder, and all the donors of time, materials, and equipment. To all involved, I offer a sincere thank-you for everything you’ve done.

Scott Kuehn has posted numerous photos of the Blitz Build on his Facebook page. A video of the event can be found at <http://vimeo.com/111249101>. **FS**



These students from the University of Montana’s College of Forestry and Conservation pitched in to build a Habitat for Humanity home in Missoula.