

# Habitat for Humanity walkthrough highlights new homeowners

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READING, PA

They might not look like much, the row houses at the corner of Fourth and Elm streets in the city.

For years, they were boarded up. Trash decorated the sidewalk in front of them, and their brick was besmirched with graffiti. For some, they were just abandon homes, a common sight in an urban environment.

For Habitat for Humanity of Berks County, the homes had potential. So the organization purchased them and got to work.

Habitat for Humanity recently hosted a walkthrough of the newly renovated homes, highlighting the families that will be owning them in a few months.

Although unpainted wood and drywall is still prevalent in her home, Crystal Gray, 41, of Reading is buzzing.

"I'm excited, it's surreal," Gray said. "It's a little overwhelming.

"But before the walkthrough took place, Executive Director Timothy J. Daley said he wanted to address a couple of misconceptions about his organization.

First off, Habitat for Humanity doesn't simply give away homes.

"We don't build homes and give them to people," Daley said. "We don't do that.

"Potential homeowners have to work for them, he said. During the application process, applicants need to demonstrate they have a steady job and meet the organization's salary requirements. For a family of four, that requirement is \$42,000 annually.

Additionally, Habitat for Humanity does a credit check. Unlike banks, who do a similar credit check when looking at home loans, the organization takes certain things into account, said Stephanie Rodriguez, 30, of Reading.

A single mother of two, Rodriguez said she was unable to get a home loan and had poor credit. Habitat for Humanity helped her improve her credit and eventually accepted her into the program.

"They work with you," she said.

Accepted families need to attend 76 hours of homeowner education, where bills and other basic home maintenance is discussed.

Finally, to receive their homes, families need to complete 400 hours of sweat equity by either helping work on the homes or volunteering for Habitat for Humanity.

Gray noted that working on her home was hard. The first thing she had to do was clear out the years of trash and decay that filled the building. There were piles of carpet filled with trash and other disgusting things, including dead cats, she said.

"We filled up six dumpsters," she added.

When she first saw her home, Gray said, she couldn't imagine it being habitable.

"From day one, I couldn't envision it," Gray said. "It took me a while to envision it.

"Gray expects to move into her home early next year with daughters Jade, 22, Kimani Emmanuel, 17, and Aspen, 3. Rodriguez, with more than 100 hours of sweat equity under her belt, said she probably won't be able to move into her house for months.

But having moved three times this year alone, she said the work is worth it.

"I'm so looking forward to this house," she said.

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