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# Nonprofit helps rebuild spirits and restore pride to local families

by Donna Lane | May 18, 2018 | Business | 0 comments

## Morgan Hill, Gilroy properties benefit from improvement program

*Published in the May 23 – June 5, 2018 issue of Morgan Hill Life*

On April 28, four South County homeowners and one community center benefited from Rebuilding Together Silicon Valley, which renovates homes and community facilities at no cost through a network of volunteers. Each spring and fall, teams of volunteers spend a few hours on their Rebuilding Day to hammer, paint, or do a little landscaping for folks who may not be able to do those tasks themselves.



*Photo courtesy Rebuilding Together*

Volunteers Israel Cardozo and Alberto Alvares, with Red Roots Landscape Company in Gilroy, build a staircase and landing for a wheelchair lift at the St. Joseph's Family Center in Gilroy.

The program is geared toward low-income homeowners and community centers. Beyond fresh paint and new fixtures, the nonprofit helps restore a sense of pride in their shared communities.

Leonarda Guzman welcomes the visitor who has walked up her long gravel driveway to the sound of slicing metal and multiple conversations on this overcast Saturday. Her tiny frame is draped in a bright blue T-shirt. Her name is written in Sharpie on a strip of wide masking tape across the top.

When her visitor reaches out to shake hands, she gives a hug instead. "Come and sit down," she said beneath a maze of canopied picnic tables, laden with food, in front of her home. "Are you hungry?" she offers. "There's plenty to eat."

Meanwhile, about 20 volunteers from Mission Bell Manufacturing, also in blue T-shirts, buzz like bees to a hive. Led by home captain Scott Pihl, they're cutting metal railings, painting the home's exterior, and checking in with each other to measure the day's progress. Previously, others came to strip paint, power wash, and do electrical work. On Rebuilding Day, no one stands still. They all pitch in to fix Guzman's home.



"I don't have enough words to thank them," she said of the team. Beyond the outside repairs, they've made improvements inside, including a new stove and vent for this petite great-grandmother who cooks for her church each Thursday.

Guzman began working at the age of nine in her native Mexico. With some days beginning at 3 a.m., she picked cotton, harvested fruit, and bundled onions.

In 1944, she moved to the U.S., where she met her late husband, Demetrio. Together, they worked hard and eventually welcomed six children.

In 1970, their home was moved from San Jose to Gilroy, where Demetrio, who specialized in foundation work, put it together with another house to form the house that now sits on her property.

"I thank God first, and everyone working from the bottom of my heart," she said passionately. "It's a wonderful job they're doing. To me, it's a miracle."

### **A chance to come full circle**

Across town, another crew works on St. Joseph's Family Center (SJFC), an organization close to Brian Harrigan's heart. As the owner of Executive Plan Design, he has fond memories of volunteering for SJFC when he was in high school, to gain community service hours. He heard about Rebuilding Together at a weekly meeting of the Rotary Club of Gilroy, when Terry Downing came to speak about their program.

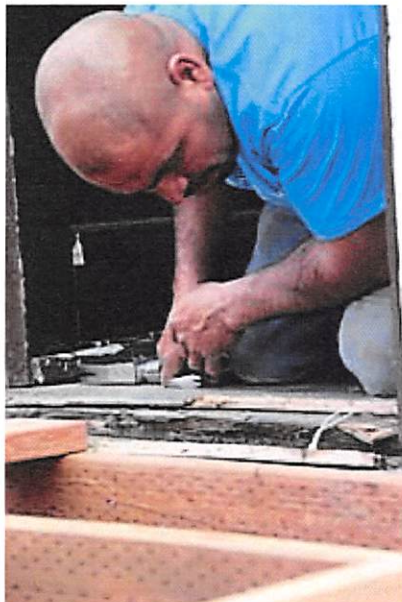


"I liked what she was saying, and I liked her mission," he recalled. "I thought, 'Well, maybe I can't write a huge check, but I can help fundraise.'"

That was the initial plan, anyway.

Soon, he was partnering with Karen Bernosky of Karen Aitken and Associates Landscape Architecture and Design. They agreed to co-sponsor a project, along with New Hope Community Church, by matching donations and recruiting volunteers. When he learned SJFC was in need, the choice was obvious.

"We increased the donation amount, so we could help a nonprofit," Harrigan said. "Then we started talking to concrete and construction companies."



SJFC was a worthy candidate, striving to improve the quality of life for under-resourced families and individuals in South County. Their services include a food pantry program offering nutritious food baskets twice monthly, daily brown bag lunch program for the community's unhoused, emergency rental/utility assistance program, Gilroy Street Team employing formerly homeless to assist with beautification projects, and more. SJFC also provides housing for chronically homeless individuals with disabilities, families in situations of domestic violence, as well as permanent housing for 25 of the most vulnerable, chronically homeless.

Several local companies stepped up to help. Harrigan particularly appreciated the contributions of Don Alvarez, Sr., of Noah Concrete Corporation, Vince and Lori Moffitt of Vince Moffitt Construction, and Red

Roots Landscape, Inc. He's grateful to the Chamber of Commerce and the numerous donors and volunteers who made the project successful.

Early prep work included demolishing a wheelchair ramp and pouring concrete. Then on Rebuilding Day, everyone came together to replace the old wooden wheelchair ramp with a new lift, build stairs and a landing, replace lighting, update bathrooms, and paint the work space.

But that's just the beginning.

"This project has sparked or maybe rekindled an ongoing partnership with New Hope and St. Joseph's," Harrigan said. "It's not going to end."

### **"A wonderful experience"**

At 81 years old, Adrien Drew stays active by line dancing. But she still needed some help fixing up her Morgan Hill mobile home. The team assigned to her property, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Morgan Hill, repaired her oven door, put in some new faucets, replaced damaged siding, painted her home's exterior, deck, and railing, installed new carpet on her deck, and took care of some landscaping projects.

"Ten years ago, I could've done everything myself," she said. "But I'm not as young as I used to be." So, she's grateful for the help.

"This was a wonderful experience," Drew said with enthusiasm. "Everyone was very solicitous and caring. They did everything I asked for, and even cleaned everything up so there was no mess when they left. They were just terrific."

### **An unexpected blessing**

Paulette Harris provides child care and emergency foster care in her Morgan Hill home. At 65, she needs to have both knees replaced and struggles to get around. A friend from church referred her to Rebuilding Together.

"I'm grateful to be one of the people chosen for this opportunity," Harris said. "I can't even express in words how amazing it has been. HGA Architects and Engineers, who sponsored me, made me feel like part of their team. It's very heartfelt to have people that really care."

On Rebuilding Day, her crew installed toilets, faucets, railing, and a screen door. They also re-did a bathroom floor and painted.

"I hadn't heard of Rebuilding Together before this," Harris said. "But now they're in my mind and heart."

Another Morgan Hill beneficiary is a 78-year-old Navy veteran, whose project was sponsored by San Jose Marriott. The crew working on his mobile home painted, replaced a toilet and furnace, and installed smoke and CO detectors.

For many, those are simple weekend projects. However, for homeowners who are elderly, disabled, or suffering from various health conditions, home maintenance can be challenging. Rebuilding Together gives them an opportunity to be comfortable, safe, and take pride, in the homes they love.

### A legacy fulfilled

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Demetrio Guzman's sombrero hangs on the wall of the home he shared with his wife. That hat is a reminder of the sacrifices he made for his family in their 58 years together.

Some days he worked until his hands bled. Now Rebuilding volunteers in blue T-shirts are carrying on the work he started, restoring that home, allowing her to rest. After referring to her children as "my treasures" and beaming about the birth of a new great-granddaughter that very morning, Leonarda Guzman tears up when thinking of Demetrio, who died in 2014.

"What would he think of all this?" her visitor asked.

Without hesitation, she squares her shoulders, points skyward, and said, "He would thank God first, and he would say that everyone here is wonderful."

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## Donna Lane

Donna Lane is a storyteller and San Jose native who earned her journalism degree at San Francisco State University. She lives in Gilroy with her family, who inspire her to celebrate life each day.

### CURRENT TEMPERATURE IN MORGAN HILL

# 58°

57°  
TUE

53°  
WED

52°  
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49°  
FRI

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