

Rebuilding Together Tulsa

A local agency renovates homes for disabled and elderly homeowners.

by Rachel Zwerneman

Wanda Barnes, a Tulsa resident for nearly 57 years, was growing tired of sleeping with a pot next to her head to catch the rain, so she contacted Rebuilding Together Tulsa to request help. What she got was more than a little help; Barnes hit the home renovation jackpot.

"All I was expecting was what I asked for — a roof," Barnes says. "But don't get me wrong, I appreciate all of it."

New paint, light fixtures, doors, faucets, flooring and blinds were some of the improvements made in Barnes' home.

Barnes is one of 28 recipients who will benefit from the organization's assistance this year. From wheelchair ramps to electrical work, RTT helps low-income, elderly and disabled homeowners throughout Tulsa.

The nonprofit was established in 1997 and has helped renovate 101 homes around the city in its eight years. All of the repairs are free to the homeowners and performed by local volunteers. Through donations from local businesses, RTT is able to stretch every dollar and achieve results on a limited budget.

Deanna Boston, RTT executive director, says, "For every dollar donated, we put four dollars back into the community. We are able to do that because of all the supplies and labor that are donated."

The majority of the home repair takes place on the Annual Work Day, when 500 volunteers help to rebuild Tulsa. On the last Saturday in April each year, teams from corporations, churches, neighborhoods, clubs and civic organizations gather at their selected home sites and perform safety makeovers.

RTT repairs carpentry, plumbing, electrical systems, painting, weather-stripping and roofing.

Each team includes a captain and a skill captain who work together to complete difficult tasks. The projects are divided so that volunteers of all skill levels can participate. Since the teams select their homes, they are able to decide on the amount of work they can handle.

Boston says when they select the homes for the Annual Work Day, they try to balance the amount of work that is needed in each home.

"We have houses that are light, medium and heavy," she says. "A light house may just be interior and exterior painting and some weatherproofing. A heavy house needs plumbing, electrical, roofing and



Wanda Barnes' kitchen and ceiling were renovated by volunteers from Rebuilding Together Tulsa.

window replacement. They could need 10 to 50 volunteers."

Finding this balance is not always easy. Last year, the offices received 300 phone calls and reviewed 75 applications. Many of those inquiring were disqualified because they did not meet all of the necessary criteria.

Low-income homeowners, who are over 60 or living with a disability, are eligible for RTT. They must live within the Tulsa City limits and be unable to perform the improvements themselves.

The projects are all safety related. Program manager **Jennifer Barcus-Schafer** says that the work done is not considered remodeling.

"That sounds a little bit fluffier than what we do — it's not for beauty, it's for safety," she says.

For **Elijah Williams**, the removal of an old shed in his yard allowed neighbors to view his house for the first time. He says that since they can see his house now, it will be easy for them to watch out for him.

Like Barnes, Williams was also amazed by the amount of work done to his property. The Williams Company performed an enormous amount of work on his home and made it easier for him to complete tasks like taking a shower and climbing the stairs.

"It was a whole group of wonderful people, I tell people about it (RTT) every day," he says. "They have changed my home inside and out."

Williams is one the organization's major participants. A-Best Roofing, Bama Companies, Bank of America, Bank One, the City of Tulsa, Brad & Beth Colvard, Hillcrest, Home Depot, the Ralph & Francis McGill Foundation, Whirlpool, Sherwin Williams and the Anne & Henry Zarrow Foundation also contribute substantially to RTT. The Home Builders Association will donate 50 percent of the profits from this month's Remodel Tulsa Tour to RTT.