

Home is where the health is

LYNLEY DONNELLY - Nov 12 2007 00:00

Erecting 200 houses in a week might sound improbable. Erecting 200 houses, a community centre and creating a communal garden in just seven days sounds downright impossible. But 1 380 international volunteers from the Niall Mellon Township Trust aim to do just that.

The "building blitz", taking place in Mitchells Plain in the Western Cape this week, follows three similar campaigns the charity has undertaken in the Imizamo Yethu township near Hout Bay since 2003. Volunteers for the project come mostly from Ireland, with a sprinkling of Europeans and Americans.

John Moore (54), from Ireland, has been to South Africa for all of the trust's building blitzes. "It's marvellous," he said. "Nothing else could have given me such satisfaction. Two hundred houses is a tall order, but we'll pull together and get the job done." He was surprised, though, by the lack of South African volunteers working on the project: "I am disappointed that we don't see more South Africans getting involved."

The housing charity -- founded by Irish property developer Niall Mellon in 2002 -- will house 1 200 people in Freedom Park, Mitchells Plain.

The construction project coincides with the release of an impact assessment commissioned by the trust on how brick and mortar houses have made a difference to the lives of some of the Cape's poorest. All the houses have electricity, indoor plumbing, running water, solar-heated geysers and at least two bedrooms.

The report identifies seven ways in which owning a house leads to a better quality of life, including improved health, education, dignity, psychological wellbeing and physical safety.

"The sense of dignity that [participants] expressed at owning a house and that comes with living in a fixed space was overwhelming," said Jerushah Rangasami of Impact Consulting, co-author of the report. She said the psychological effects a home had on recipients was an unexpected outcome of the research.

The research was conducted earlier this year in Imizamo Yethu, where the trust built 448 houses between 2003 and 2005. Teachers and health workers noted positive effects that were directly attributable to living in a formal house. Health workers, for example, found it easier to locate patients and follow up on treatment if they had a fixed address. Nurses also noted a decrease in cases of gastroenteritis and impetigo, diseases commonly associated with shack life and a lack of running water.

Community nurses have seen a reduction in the number of burns because residents now use electricity instead of paraffin and open fires for heating and cooking. "We used to see burns every day in winter -- but now we have had only a few this whole winter," a nurse said. Moving from a shack in Imizamo Yethu -- which has two toilets for 16 000 residents -- to a house with running water and a private toilet has been a life-changing experience for many. "We lived in filth [in the shacks] -- the streets were dirty, the toilets were so dirty that I couldn't go in," one of the participants said.

Rangasami related how a senior citizen had told her that since moving into her new home her mind felt "fresh" and she could plan different things for her life, such as furthering her education, whereas previously all her energy had been focused on daily survival. Separate bedrooms and increased privacy meant "children are not exposed to sexual activity and there is less exposure to their parents arguing, which is beneficial to their development", said Rangasami.

Children living in houses built by the trust also found it easier to study and focus on their school work, as they now have more space, electric light, warmth and quiet. Said one learner: "I can now study in peace -- unlike in the shacks, where there was always noise because of the shebeens all over the place. My life is much better than before."

The added safety provided by a house also contributed positively to beneficiaries' lives. In addition to better protection from the elements, recipients felt a greater sense of personal security. "Today I'm able to lock my house when I go somewhere and not worry about burglars," said a participant. "When I stayed in a shack, even if you locked it -- criminals could still tear a side of the metal and go in."

The trust plans to establish a "super housing factory" in Cape Town next year. The factory will produce about 100 houses a week and operate like an assembly line, with a basic structure assembled at the factory and then erected on site, said Deirdre Grant, director of the trust. The factory will use high-quality timber-frame technology, which is the preferred method of construction of 70% of all houses in North America and 40% of all houses in Ireland, said Grant. To increase safety the walls are lined with two fire-resistant layers of plaster board or cement fibre board, in line with safety requirements, said Hugh Brennan, chief executive of the trust. The factory will meet the need for both speedy delivery and a high quality product. "Government -- for all the work it has done -- is falling behind in meeting housing demand," said Grant. "The back-log is growing by 250 000 a year."

And the department of housing is pleased with the work done by the trust.

"We welcome all forms of partnerships," said Ndivhuwo wa ha Mabaya, spokesperson for the department. "We continue to work with many NGOS, among them the Federation for Urban Dwellers, Habitat For Humanity, and people like Niall Mellon. They play a very important role in the housing chain."

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