

Raising walls and families

Women

Women construct homes for National Women Build Week

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WAUKESHA — More than 30 women equipped with tools, the eagerness to build and the drive to shape their community banded together in the pouring rain Wednesday morning to construct two Habitat for Humanity homes on White Rock Avenue.

These volunteers kicked off the first day of National Women Build Week — a nationwide initiative created by Habitat for Humanity and Lowe’s in 2008 to educate and inspire women to help Habitat by building and improving homes, said Diane McGeen, executive director of Habitat for Humanity in Waukesha.

“The idea is to empower women to say number one, you can step out of your wheelhouse and do things like build a house,” McGeen said. “That’s not something that a lot of women have on their radar and yet we empower them to do that. And the second thing is just helping other families by doing something that’s a little uncomfortable.”

Habitat Waukesha began the process of revitalizing the strip of White Rock Avenue between Frame Park and downtown Waukesha in 2016. This year, the organization is building four new houses and rehabbing three, said McGeen. She added that the new and rehabbed homes will help revive the White Rock neighborhood.

“When you put homeowners into these houses, it changes the neighborhood because now it’s owneroccupied homeowners who are putting pride into their homes,” said McGeen.

Learning to build

At the project site, volunteers were measuring, sawing and hammering as they worked the step-by-step process of erecting a

home. Jim and JoAnn Lawler, retirees who offered their time and expertise, oversaw the project as the women learned to raise the walls and tie them all together with a top plate, said Jim Lawler.

“We try to explain what we’re doing so it’s not just, ‘Here’s a nail, go drive it,’” Jim Lawler said. “Explain not only why, but how we’re doing it and how it relates to the next step.”

The Lawlers have seen the positive affects of Habitat for Humanity from a project they were a part of in Nashville, Tennessee, Jim Lawler said. When the couple retired, they decided that they wanted to give back and share the pride of building a home with others.

“All of a sudden it’s a house and you forget about what you had to do to get there,” Lawler said. “So, it’s just really enjoyable for me.”

Providing stability

For Olivia Odegard, a mother in Waukesha, building her home and the homes of others means providing stability to the community and for her son — an experience she didn’t have as a kid, she said.

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Volunteers from local nonprofits and corporate sponsors raise a wall. Habitat Waukesha sponsored

National Women Build Week to work on building a White Rock Avenue home on Wednesday.

Mary Catanese/Special to The Freeman



Maria Peot uses a power saw to cut boards to be used in building walls at a home on White Rock.



Alicia Buttchen, right, watches Sarah Szejn pound the bottom of a wall to align it before it was raised. She joined other volunteers to help build a home on White Rock Avenue on Wednesday.

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“I moved around a lot as a child, so to own a house and know that my son is going to be in this school district his whole life from kindergarten up to high school is something that I never had,” Odegard said. “It’s going to mean so much more to me that he can have that.”

Odegard is the future owner of a Habitat for Humanity house, except her home will be built near Silvernail Road and North Grandview Boulevard in Waukesha. Even though

to be intimidated, adding that she felt comfortable since everyone was learning together.

“We can do it too and there’s really nothing to fear, it’s a good learning experience,” Odegard said. “I would recommend it for all the ladies out there.”

National Women Build Week has brought together more than 117,000 all-women construction volunteers to build or repair homes with nearly 5,000 families. For those who like to volunteer, visit <https://www.habitatwaukesha.org/volunteer>.



construction won't begin on her home until the fall, in the meantime she is putting in "sweat equity hours," the 250 volunteer hours that each homeowner must fulfill, she said.

Odegard said she took off work just to be a part of National Women Build Week. She's described her whole experience with Habitat Waukesha as unique and something she'll always remember. And for the women out there wondering if they should be part of the initiative, Odegard said there's no reason

"Every time you lift a hammer you're one step closer to completing a home," Diane McGeen, executive director of Habitat Waukesha, right, said. Olivia Odegard, left, came to put in "sweat equity hours," as part of becoming a future homeowner.

Mary Catanese/Special to The Freeman