

REBUILDING TOGETHER

Told by Skye Trimble

It was three-thirty in the morning, and Frances Vaughn had just finished her shift at the *Washington Post*. Her hands were ink-stained from hours of sorting papers. By moonlight, she hurried to make the last bus of the night. Holding tight to the driver's hand, Frances climbed aboard. She sat in the first empty seat and closed her tired eyes. To pass the time, she began to hum a tune quietly. Soon the engine's roar shifted. The weary woman knew her stop was next. After the driver helped her down, Frances thanked him with her dark eyes.

She followed the streetlights to her house and gazed up at her stairs. Those darn steps. With two artificial knees, it was a real struggle for Frances. She'd done it before and she would do it again. But at seventy-two years old, it wasn't easy.

Frances went to bed that night thinking about her future. She lay on her old mattress, looking around the dilapidated room. Over the years, her house had fallen apart around her. She wished she could take care of it as she used to, before she got sick. She hated to think of moving to a nursing home or even living on the streets. Tonight, as she did every night, Frances prayed with a hopeful heart.

She awakened to a surprising phone call from Patty Johnson, the co-founder of Rebuilding Together. For fourteen years, its more than 255 chapters across the country have been organizing volunteers, rekindling the tradition of neighbors helping neighbors. Their specialty happened to

be repairing low-income homes.

Frances stood awestruck, wrapped in her flannel nightgown, listening to Patty's enthusiasm pour out over the phone: "One Saturday in April each year, we send our crew to homes all over the country," she explained. "By dinnertime, neighbors like you have a little comfort and security back in their lives. This year we'd like to visit your house!"

Frances was quiet for a moment. She searched her memory and finally had to admit that, in all her years, nobody had ever helped her with her home. Patty Johnson's news was welcome indeed. "This is an extraordinary day!" Frances exclaimed to Patty. As she hung up the phone, her heart raced and she was already quite excited, just thinking about fixing things up.

On the last Saturday in April, thirty eager volunteers arrived at Frances's door. They carried supplies donated from corporate sponsors like Home Depot, and under Patty Johnson's guidance, as Frances puts it, "they tore my house up and put it back together again, like it was brand-new!" Frances perched nearby, beaming, especially when they fixed the stairs. They built the strongest banister possible, so Frances could get up and down the steps more easily. If that were all the Rebuilding Together crew did, she would have been happy. But these kind folks had more in store for Frances. While some patched her leaky roof, others laid down tile and carpet, secured her front door with a new lock, and installed a safer stove and a smoke detector. They laid down sod for the lawn and a shade tree.

That day, every corner of Frances's home had smiles and stories. Anyone passing by the "neighborhood family" would have seen various

members of the community pitching in. Street kids worked side by side with the ladies of the Junior League, who “turn their white gloves to white paint,” as Patty puts it. “It all comes from caring people,” Patty reflects. “There are no suits, no white or blue collars, just people. That’s the way it should be.” Even President Reagan sent some of his staff to chip away the old paint and slap on a fresh coat of white.

One teenage boy sat outside with Frances, breathing the sweet smell of new grass. He told her how Patty Johnson came from a poor home and grew up determined to help people feel secure in theirs. He described her work as “building miracles, one house at a time.” Frances was impressed when he explained that their energetic leader had worked overtime in her unheated cellar, just to get the program going, nearly fifteen years ago. She felt a deep sense of gratitude—and a real sisterhood with Patty’s enthusiastic spirit.

That evening, everyone gathered outside Frances’s beautiful new house. As she proudly walked up the stairs, holding on to the new banister, her new friends cheered, “Fran-ces! Fran-ces!” She might not have believed it if she weren’t standing right on it, what Rebuilding Together had created in just one day.

*The world needs friendly folks like you.
In this troubled world, it’s refreshing to find someone
Who still has the time to be kind.
Someone who still has the faith to believe that
The more you give, the more you receive.
Someone who’s ready by thought, word or deed*

To reach out a hand, in the hour of need.

HELEN STEINER RICE

Join the quarter-million volunteers of Rebuilding Together, rehabilitating homes and renewing the lives of the elderly and disabled. Call 202-483-9083, or visit their Web site, www.rebuildingtogether.com, to connect with one of the 865 communities nationwide.