



Drummond: Building a better community

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Last month, as some of you may remember, I wrote a column about how fed up I was with the constant bombardment of bad news.

I promised that beginning this month, I would write at least one column that focused on people and organizations who are making a positive contribution to our communities.

Of course, no sooner had I written those words than we experienced a shocking spasm of violence in Oakland and across the nation, which we don't need to repeat or relive here.

I was beginning to worry that after having gotten up so high on my soapbox, I wasn't going to be able to find my way back down.

But last weekend, I celebrated Earth Day by participating in the Habitat for Humanity East Bay Build-A-Thon. My faith in most people's basic goodness got a much-needed injection.

Habitat uses volunteers — mostly ordinary people who know little if anything about the construction trade — to build homes for families with limited incomes who otherwise couldn't purchase a home. In exchange for putting in 500 hours of "sweat equity" — helping build their own and future neighbors' homes — the families get an almost unbelievable deal: 0 percent interest, with no money down, for 30 years. So far, Habitat East Bay has built

some 200 homes around Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

I have given money to Habitat over the years because I can see concrete evidence of where my donations go. But I never had gone out myself and hammered any nails.

On Saturday, I showed up at 7:30 a.m. at the construction site near 105th Avenue and Edes in East Oakland. The plan was for volunteers to erect the frames for 20 homes over the course of four days. More than 1,000 people would show up.

I meandered through the bustling construction site until I found my assigned home, which consisted of a concrete foundation with one wooden shell of a wall sticking out of it.

I fished a white construction helmet from a cardboard box and adjusted it on my head, then tied a tool belt around my waist and grabbed a hammer. So far, so good.

I met some of the other volunteers along with my crew leader, Mary McCullough, an energetic AmeriCorps worker whose confidence in our abilities far exceeded my own.

Another Habitat worker drilled us about safety techniques. It's not a race, though it may feel like that at times. Take your time. Avoid rough ground and trip hazards. Give forklifts the right of way; don't play chicken with them.

Next, we began hauling beams of wood in a nearby pile of lumber back to our site. In teams of two, we hoisted them on our shoulders.

Then came the fun part.

Let's just say, hammering a nail in straight is a lot

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harder than it looks. Especially the long ones called 32s. Just when I'd get the thing in about halfway, it would start to bend. The harder I banged, the more crooked it got.

I tried bending over so the hammer would meet the head at full impact. Various positions. Sweating and cursing mightily under my breath. The nail would go in just far enough so that I couldn't pry it out with a crowbar. The same for my fellow volunteer Begona Cirera, a native of Barcelona, who teaches at Chabot College.

Between us, the language got pretty colorful. I'm embarrassed to say that a couple of times I had to ask a Habitat crew member to come over with his electric saw and chop off my mistake.

I eventually got the hang of it. Sort of.

By noon, the sun was hammering down on our heads like an iron mallet. The sweat poured off us as we hammered nails, hoisted beams, doors and walls.

I can't tell you how inspiring it was to see so many people selflessly working to help others.

"You read in the papers how terrible everything is," said volunteer Thomas Lauderbach, 58, of Oakland. "But then you come out here and you see white people, old people, young people, all working together for a cause."

Throughout the four days of the build, there would be some of everybody there: faith groups; a wedding party that had just had the ceremony the previous day and then came out to build homes; people who'd received organ transplants; college students; Wells Fargo and other corporations.

Tran Do, 32, had a baby five months earlier but said it was important for her to be there to set an

example for her young son. Another woman baked hundreds of cupcakes and sold them at her office to raise \$500.

All told, volunteers raised \$200,000.

Janice Jensen, Habitat East Bay's executive director, said that although housing prices have fallen, there is still very much a need for the services Habitat provides.

"Market prices have fallen, but the lending has tightened," she said. "People we serve if they could afford to buy, which most of them can't, can't get a loan."

Natasya Bernard, a 34-year-old single mom, had given up on her dream of homeownership.

Then she got a Habitat flier in the mail. Now she and her sons, 12 and 4, will be moving into their new three-bedroom home early next year.

She proudly gave me a tour of her home in progress.

"There is no way I could have bought this on my income as a single mother," said Bernard, who works as a patient account representative at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco.

Bernard will put in hundreds more hours of sweat equity before she moves in.

Giving hardworking people like Bernard a helping hand is what community should be all about.

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