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Volunteers solar-panel 16 new houses in one day

Submitted by [mkflynn](#) on September 14, 2009 – 7:00 pm [2 Comments](#)

by Mary K. Flynn/Oakland North

Most people would probably find the early-morning sound effects at Marie Henderson's new place in Sobrante Park yesterday—hammers pounding on a roof, construction voices calling out to each other, and the whirring of power drills—a bit of a nuisance. But to Henderson, they were music to the ears: she was helping build her own home.



Marie Henderson assists a Solarthon teammate install the solar electric system for her home

“My house is progressing very well,” she said happily, brushing off her hands and adjusting the red bandana tied to her head beneath a big white hard hat.

Henderson, 56, had joined over 250 volunteers in a one-day mega-installation of solar panels for 16 affordable homes being constructed in the Sobrante Park neighborhood of Oakland.

GRID Alternatives, an Oakland-based nonprofit that uses volunteer labor to install solar panels on low-income housing, joined Habitat for Humanity East Bay and Pacific Gas & Electric Company to host its fourth annual Solarthon, a group installation project geared to bring cost-saving solar energy to 16 homes of low-income families.

Henderson is a former preschool teacher who currently works as a nanny. She and her 13 year-old son, Christopher, currently live in a rented North Oakland apartment, where they have to share the one bedroom. "It was good when he was little, but at this time, it's not possible," she said.

The apartment is in an old house, she said, and the dust wreaks havoc on Christopher's numerous allergies. "I buy at least two boxes of tissues for him a week," Henderson said.

Henderson applied last December for housing through Habitat for Humanity East Bay. The organization chooses its homeowners based on three major criteria: demonstrated need for housing; a commitment to 500 hours of "sweat equity" working with Habitat to build their home; and an ability to pay. Contrary to popular belief, Habitat homes are not given away. The organization's clients become homeowners with regular mortgage payments to Habitat, which holds the mortgage. Henderson currently pays \$800 a month in rent, and she expects to pay \$800-\$1000 a month to own her home. Habitat ensures the costs of ownership are limited to no more than 30% of a homeowner's income.

Solarthon took place in the Habitat East Bay Edes Avenue development, a project begun in 2002 to transform a former auto salvage lot into environmentally sustainable homes for 54 families.

GRID Alternatives, which frequently works with Habitat East Bay, also joined in on the the Edes project, augmenting the energy-conserving properties Habitat has worked to build into all the development's new homes. Once Habitat found the families and organized construction of the homes, GRID organized the solar installation. Both missions were accomplished with the help of a thriving volunteer force.

According to the GRID Alternatives website, the solar electric systems they install reduce each family's electric bills by approximately 75% and significantly reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emitted.

"There's a great synergy here," said Krysta Morgenthaler, Vice President of Fund Development & Communications for Habitat for Humanity East Bay. "The Habitat East Bay affiliate is one of the leaders in green building and has been since 2000," she said. The Edes development, where the Hendersons' future home is located, has been the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold certification for three of its homes, she said.

For Henderson, living eco-friendly has always been a way of life. She is originally from Belgium, where she said the recycling laws are much more strict. "It's not only for me," she said, "I think it's a responsibility of everyone."

That sentiment is shared by many of the Solarthon participants, and likely many more, given that GRID Alternatives has more volunteers than they do jobs.

"We're oversubscribed, but it's a good problem," said GRID Alternatives Development Director, Zach Franklin. "It's a chance for people to give back, learn more about installation, or if they're thinking about going solar, they can learn more about it. Some people look at it as training for a career path, and some just a chance to give back to the community."

GRID volunteers attend a mandatory three-hour training class to learn basics of solar installation and electric concepts before being allowed to participate in an installation. "I think it's great," said Katie Taylor, 23, a political science major at Humboldt State University, while munching on pizza with the rest of the volunteers during the lunch break. "Everything is so well set up that even without a lot of knowledge, I can jump in and help out and not feel like I'm just standing around."

For Glenn Hall, 38, an unemployed manufacturing engineer, volunteering is also a way to research a potential career direction. Yesterday's Solarthon marked his fifth installation.

"It's a win situation for everybody," said Hall, taking a break while keeping an eye on two other team members

bending conduit pipe alongside the house. “Families are benefitting from clean, renewable energy, volunteers get experience and get to help out.”

According to Franklin, Solarthon is GRID Alternative’s biggest installation event and fundraiser for the year, and volunteers were asked to raise a minimum of \$250 each in order to participate.

“Even though it’s a difficult time right now to ask people to donate, this has been one of our best fundraisers,” said Franklin, noting that Solarthon raised a total of \$105,000. The funds will go toward furthering the GRID mission, he said: making renewable energy technology available to those who need it most.

“It’s beneficial to everyone,” Franklin said. “But it’s a bigger benefit if you can get it in the hands of those who live month to month.”

Habitat East Bay designed the Hendersons’ two-story wood frame house as well as the surrounding Edes development homes. Habitat does not require a down payment, instead pricing the home to cover the cost of building and materials, and the organization charges no interest on the mortgage. Homeowners also pay taxes and insurance on the home, and Habitat ensures these combined costs do not exceed 30% of the family’s income.

It is a cost savings that will benefit those like Marie and Christopher Henderson, who will move into their home after its dedication day in December.

Until then, there’s still more work to do, and by early afternoon Saturday Marie was back at the side of the house where her team is well underway in the installation of her solar electrical system. At the crew leader’s suggestion, she held in place a gray, metal DC disconnect box while a teammate fastened it in place. She said Christopher was disappointed that he’s still too young to help.

“We are so excited,” she said. “He is already designing his new room.”



2 Comments »



- [Gene](#) says:

[September 14, 2009 at 8:06 pm](#)

Great write-up! I’m glad you got a picture of Marie working. The only ones I got were her holding a solar panel, but she’s very enthusiastic and works hard during the regular Habitat work days.

I did a brief write-up and posted more pictures on the [Habitat East Bay / Thrivent Builds blog](#).

- [Tips For Green Driving / Teaching about Solar Power](#) says:

[September 15, 2009 at 10:04 am](#)

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by Richard Parks/Oakland North

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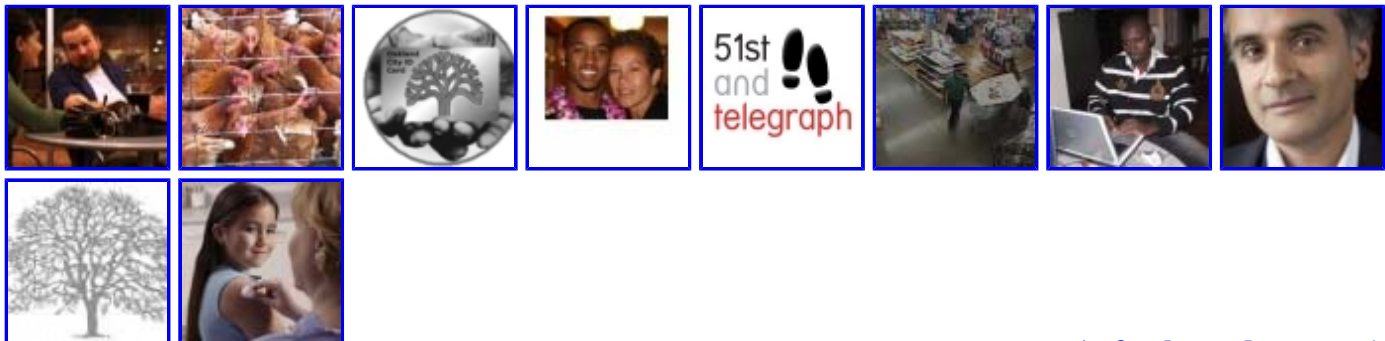
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