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## Oakland families get homes for the holidays

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Santa paid an early visit to East Oakland on Saturday, when nine low-income families received keys to homes they helped build themselves.

"I know I was somebody before, but now I've got a piece of the rock," said Lynette Knight, 58, a Wells Fargo manager who now owns a three-bedroom home on Edes Avenue. "I told the kids, 'We're going home. This is ours.' "

The homes are part of a 54-home Habitat for Humanity development on a former auto junkyard near the San Leandro border. So far, 26 homes in the development - the largest Habitat for Humanity project ever in the Bay Area - have been completed, and the rest are due to be finished next year.

In all Habitat for Humanity projects, residents help build their own homes. Knight and her two teenage grandchildren, whom she is raising, mixed concrete, caulked, painted, pounded nails and dug post holes for more than 500 hours.

"I think construction is in my blood now," said Knight, who had been living in a rented duplex in San Leandro. "I think I'm going to help build the other homes now."

The \$13 million Edes Avenue Development has been in the works since 2004, when Habitat for Humanity of the East Bay acquired the 4-acre plot of land. Using grants from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Habitat cleared the contaminated soil and started planning the development of duplexes for first-time home buyers.

With input from the future residents, architects arranged the homes around a common courtyard with barbecue grills, picnic tables, a playground, lawn and drought-resistant garden.

The two-story, wood-frame homes, each with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, are certified by a national green building council for energy efficiency and environmentally friendly construction. Each home has solar panels on the roof, concrete floors and is built with recycled materials.

Habitat for Humanity chose the residents from hundreds of applicants, based on their income, credit history and willingness to take on the responsibility of homeownership.

Residents all earn about 50 percent of the median income for the area. Habitat for Humanity loans them money for their homes with no interest and no money down.

The homes in the Edes Avenue development sell for about \$170,000, about \$50,000 less than the price for similar homes in the area. Residents can sell their home back to Habitat for Humanity at any time, and collect a percentage of the home's appreciation.

"We don't allow people to flip the homes, but we're thrilled when someone wants to leave and buy a market-rate home," said Habitat for Humanity of the East Bay executive director Janice Jensen. "We're trying to break the cycle of poverty. We don't want to see Habitat kids grow up to be Habitat homeowners. We want to see them in market-rate homes."

For the Romero family, moving into their own home is the culmination of a 10-year dream.

"We've wanted to buy our own house since we moved here from Mexico, but we could never afford it," said Maria Romero, 47, a teacher's aide who had lived in an apartment Oakland's Fruitvale district with her husband, who works as a cook, and two children.

"We heard about this program from a neighbor, but we never thought we'd be approved," she said. "We are so thrilled to be here now."

The first thing the Romeros plan to do is buy a puppy for their children, ages 14 and 6. The family has never had a backyard before.

Knight plans to buy a flat-screen TV and decorate her home like a showplace.

"I'm not married, but if I was I'd have someone carry me over the threshold," she said. "I feel like I'm finally home."

### **Online resources**

**For more information, go to:** [www.habitategb.org](http://www.habitategb.org).

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