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# An antidote to gentrification, Rebuilding Together Houston builds big dreams

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Rebuilding Houston Together volunteer Don Grimm works on installing a window A/C and heat unit into a home in Houston on Wednesday, Sept. 1, 2021.  
Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Twice a year, Don Grimm assembles a crew of 20 volunteers to bring homes back to life.

He's a co-leader for a team at Rebuilding Together Houston, a nonprofit dedicated to rebuilding homes and revitalizing communities.

The Katy resident said the goal is to ensure houses can withstand another 10 to 20 years' use by making needed updates. He has led his crew in replacing doors and windows, reinforcing structure, adding insulation or repairing rotten wood. Often they add a finishing touch such as a new porch light or address numbers by the front door.

"And we always paint the house, top to bottom," Grimm added.

A couple of days before the project starts, he and co-leader Brad Rinderknecht prepare a list of must-dos.

"Almost always, we add to it," he said.

Then, the duo heads to the Rebuilding Together Houston warehouse to round up materials. Next, they take a rented truck, go to their storage unit and load up tools for the jobs.

Grimm began volunteering with Rebuilding Together Houston after an information session at ExxonMobil 15 years ago, before he retired from the company. Exxon sponsors the team, covering the cost of the vehicle, storage unit, tools and lunches for volunteers.

## HOW TO HELP

Rebuilding Together Houston is seeking volunteers, donations and in-kind materials. For more information, visit

[rebuildinghouston.org](http://rebuildinghouston.org).

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“I’ve always liked doing handyman work,” he said. “And it’s a way to give back.”

Then, about five years ago, former team leader Dan King retired from ExxonMobil to take a full-time position at Rebuilding Together Houston.

Grimm stepped up and took over the crew with Rinderknecht, also an Exxon employee, at his side.

On Saturday mornings, the two are the first to arrive on the job site.

## Getting started

“God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves,” Grimm said. “This is my way to use what talents He has given me to serve others.”

Even after all this time with the nonprofit, he said each experience is always rewarding.

“It’s a pleasure every time you see someone about to get something they really needed but were never able to do on their own,” he said.

Take wheelchair ramps, for example, he said. They can make a world of difference for people with disabilities or who simply can no longer navigate stairs to their home.

“Everyone has a different story — and most are so grateful,” Grimm added. “You see the homeowners and the joy it brings them. You see a house that may have been one of the most rundown on the street when we arrive and watch it transform to one of the nicest when we leave.”

Rebuilding Together CEO Christine Holland sees the organization as a critical tool in fixing Houston’s affordable housing crisis.

“Our vision is to preserve as many existing homes as possible,” she said. ““We need to not discard the homes that are already here and just need a little TLC.”

Rebuilding Together believes its no-cost home repairs can strengthen a neighborhood and, in turn, make a positive impact in the city. The organization prioritizes veterans and wheelchair ramps, constructed for any low-income homeowners in Harris County.

Residents of Second Ward and Magnolia Park-Manchester neighborhoods are also eligible to apply for roof repairs, structural stabilization, exterior updates and interior modifications.

By focusing on a specific neighborhood, Holland said, teams make the greatest impact. After volunteers renovate houses, neighbors are often inspired to tackle their own projects, which then encourages businesses to stay.

It's an antidote to gentrification, Holland explained.

"We believe in giving people a choice," she said. "They might feel like their only option is to sell to a developer and never own a house again. We want them to have a choice to keep their house."

Preventing displacement and preserving financial resources for families is the priority, she added.

"No homeowner should have to choose between the food on their table and the roof over their heads," Holland said.

## Stepping in to help Houston

The nonprofit was founded nearly 40 years ago by Houstonian Robert Mosbacher Jr.

First called the Private Sector Initiative, the organization followed idea of using volunteerism to supplement government programs, Holland explained.

"There are a lot of gaps, and nonprofits are the bridge," she said.

Initially, the group responded to a variety of calls.

“They had different programs, but this is the part that really stuck,” Holland said. “They were attracting volunteer crews from corporations, churches and schools to do home repairs. And they started to focus on this more.”

Volunteers began to form bonds with homeowners, she added.

“They could literally see how their work was making a positive impact,” Holland said. “That’s what still brings people to us today. It feeds their hearts.”

In 2003, the Private Sector Initiative joined the national organization Rebuilding Together, which provides elderly and disabled individuals, as well as veterans, with access to home repairs.

“Now we have 120 affiliates,” Holland said. “They work all around the country.”

In 2015, Rebuilding Together Houston’s efforts increased tenfold.

The organization partnered with the city of Houston’s Housing and Community Development Department for repairs for the next three years. More than 800 homes were on the list, including repairing a number of roofs still tarped up from 2008’s Hurricane Ike. .

“During hurricane season, one thing that can make a big difference is a roof,” Holland said. “It can best protect your house.”

Then Hurricane Harvey struck.

“We were in a unique position,” Holland said. “We already had contractors whom we had vetted. We also had hundreds of people in our system. We got in touch with those people.”

Rebuilding Together Houston was able to quickly spring into action.

“We had never done disaster recovery, but soon we were doing it day in and day out,” Holland said. “Harvey just changed the landscape. We knew we had to jump in. There was no standing on the sidelines.”

In total, 480 houses damaged by Harvey have been refurbished. The last home was completed in June.

Rebuilding Together Houston was also engaged in construction related to winter storm Uri, repairing 257 homes. In this case, the organization focused on serving veterans and two neighborhoods: Independence Heights and Second Ward.

“Disaster recovery is a logical extension of our affordable housing work,” Holland said. “We’re returning the home to a safe and livable condition. And we’re going to do as much as we possibly can.”

## Building equity

The number of repairs possible depends of funding, she explained. Rebuilding Together Houston also relies on in-kind materials.

By becoming a volunteer or donating to the nonprofit, Houstonians can help others stay in their homes and build equity in housing in the city, she explained.

Corporations and churches often provide helping hands for the 20-volunteer crews like the ones Grimm leads, and assignments are made based on skill level. BP maintains 451 crews and ExxonMobil, 385. The United Methodist Action Reach-Out Mission by Youth (UM ARMY) has 355 crews and Second Baptist Church, 263.

Options also exist for smaller groups, between two and five people. These volunteers perform home-safety checks, including examining air quality, cooling and heating, and ensuring there are smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. Crews of five can help build wheelchair ramps, and single volunteers are needed in the nonprofit’s office.

“No one should have a house that’s falling down,” Holland said.

*Lindsay Peyton is a Houston-based freelance writer.*