



'Makeover' didn't stop with house

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BRIDGEPORT -- On a sweltering day that made Bridgeport feel more like Biloxi, Gloria Brown received some very cool news.

Brown, whose fire-ravaged home was rebuilt for the ABC-TV show, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," was told that not only would her three children receive full, four-year scholarships at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, but also that her mortgage on her razed Hollister Avenue home would be paid off as well.

"Thank God," said Brown, fighting back tears. "And thank you everyone - if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have a bed to sleep in. Now I don't have to worry about the mortgage. I don't have to worry about tuition. I just have to worry about paying my taxes."

The "Makeover" house, at 285 Hollister Ave., was rebuilt over the last week in a monumental effort by 5,000 volunteer workers and tons of donated construction materials, supplementing the TV show's celebrity crew.

The intensive project was fueled by 42 gallons of orange juice, 210 pounds of bacon, 22 tubs of Italian ice, three pallets of nails, 130 cubic yards of concrete, 500 tons of stone, 700 plants and 1,200 square feet of sod, according to Todd Bradley, 19, a student at Boston University and volunteer publicist. Despite the pell-mell construction effort, the new house also served as a makeshift television production set, in which operations occasionally had to come to a halt to videotape segments of the show.

Today's wrap-up press conference -- following the presentation of keys to Brown and her three children Wednesday night -- began with a reminder of the show-biz aspects of the project. It began after Brown and children, Bobbi, 17; Fred, 16, and Jana'e, 14, were taped by a camera on a boom shouting, "Thank you, ABC! We love our new house!"

What was left of the mortgage on the house that was razed -- estimated to be about \$26,000 -- will be paid off by the Barnum Financial Group of Shelton, according to Mindee and Paul Blanco, owners of the finance firm. "We wanted to make sure that they came into this house debt-free," said Carla Sullivan, BFG's marketing manager.

In addition to the mortgage and the tuition and expenses for the Brown children at WCSU, today was proclaimed by Gov. M. Jodi Rell as "Brown Family Day." The proclamation was read by her administrative assistant, Chris Tymniak.

Eric Gribin, the construction manager for the contractor, Gulick Associates, said despite finishing on time, the frantic enterprise had its share of setbacks and challenges. "Our framer and his crew walked off the job while he was into the second floor," Gribin said. "We had to get roofers and siders and make them into framers,"

He added the new home's basement -- usually a cool place for those installing the furnace to work -- was turned into a 140-degree oven by accelerants used to cure the concrete faster.

The press conference took place in a tent across the street from the Browns' house -- another construction site where a new school is taking shape just south of the aging McKinley School.

The session was supposed to begin at 10 a.m., but it was running about an hour late. The delay may have been because Mayor John M. Fabrizi, who was expected to attend, but did not arrive till later.

Nonetheless, the "Makeover" project has attracted plenty of media interest, even as things wound down.

"I'm hoping that we'll be able to go live at noon," said Crystal Haynes, a reporter for WTNH-TV in New Haven.

Most neighbors said they are happy to see the large, blue house go up in the somewhat depressed area, but there was a bit of envy, too.

"It would have been better if everyone's house got fixed up," said Hector Navarro, 14, of 329 Hollister St.