



## FEATURE STORY

# Building Futures

BY BEATRIZ TERRAZAS

*Breast cancer survivors find a constructive outlet for their altruism.*

On a humid May morning in Texas, the Rev. Sheron Patterson, DMin, stands on the porch of a tidy red-brick home. The front lawn boasts new sod, and the inside smells of fresh paint and wood. Here in a southern Dallas subdivision, several Habitat for Humanity homes are under construction. But the senior pastor of Highland Hills United Methodist Church is helping dedicate this house—one built by cancer survivors she recruited, as well as their friends and families.

"This is a work of the Lord," Patterson says of Breast Cancer Builds, the fledgling program she founded to enlist breast cancer survivors to build Habitat homes. "Showing up early in the rain, in the cold. Hammering, sawing, nailing, hitting our fingers, almost slicing our hands. Truly, God is amazing."

Patterson conceived Breast Cancer Builds in 2007 while recovering from a double mastectomy. Breast cancer survivors, grateful and ready to help others, are proof, she says, that "there is life after breast cancer, and it can be better and sweeter than it was before."

Allied with the Habitat for Humanity ministry of another local church, Patterson reached out through local media and her own website, asking for 200 volunteers to "pay forward" fruits of their survival.

Bubbling with joy, laughter, and love for other women they didn't even know, they came. From as close by as Dallas and as far as suburbs an hour away, they came. For eight consecutive Saturdays beginning this past March, they came.



Allegra Dowdle (in black shirt), house leader on the project for Dallas Area Habitat for Humanity, begins the day with a safety discussion for the breast cancer volunteers who have arrived. Photos by Beatriz Terrazas.

Survivor Candy Sheehan, 53, arrived the first day clad in jeans, boots, and sunglasses, and relishing the idea of building a home for a deserving family.

"During my treatments ... I was on the receiving end of so much support and blessings and meals and everything, that it was really good for me to give back," Sheehan says.

For community activists like her, who are involved in a variety of projects, much

of the work focuses on funding and policies, she says. “This is a thing—you actually build it, you can touch it and feel it. It’s encouraging that life will continue in this place that we are building, and will become someone’s home. That’s a strong message.”



March 1: From left: Breast cancer volunteers begin placing walls on the first Saturday of the build. Catherine Harvey-Edwards (center photo, at left) gets help from Maria Gaffner and Beverly Windsor as she nails the wall into place. Gaffner and Harvey-Edwards take a minute to celebrate completion of the wall.

Juanita Valdez, a single mother of two boys, has sometimes seemed a bit overwhelmed by the help she is receiving.

“They’ve been through so much and they’re trying to help somebody else,” she says of the women who raised walls, pounded nails, and cut siding. “It makes me feel wonderful.”

The project has brought together “a rainbow coalition,” notes Breast Cancer Builds volunteer coordinator Linda Lydia, 58, a local real estate agent.

“We’re all drawn to it for the same reason,” says Lydia, an 11-year survivor. “If we’re not survivors we have a family member or a friend. ... Such a bond develops with people who’ve been through this disease.”



March 15: Juanita Valdez and her 12-year-old son James stand in front of another house being built while they wait for construction to begin on their home.

Elaine Linn, a four-year survivor, quickly became a favorite among the volunteers. More than once she joked about her obvious lack of hair ever since cancer treatment in 2004. “But hey, I don’t have bad hair days.”

It’s a privilege to have a body well enough, and in shape enough, to come out and participate, says Linn, 65, an accountant. “I’m in great debt to the doctors and women that have come before. ... It’s very important that people who have just been diagnosed know it’s not a death sentence. There are things beyond that.”

That was precisely the message Patterson hoped to impart with Breast Cancer Builds.

She echoes it in her closing words at the home’s dedication: “I am a survivor of breast cancer, and on Tuesday of this week I celebrated one year of life. ... I call this a gratitude project because I am grateful, and we’re showing how grateful we are to the world.”



April 5: Volunteers (above) cut siding for the house. Elaine Linn (below) carries trash away from the construction site.





April 12: From top left: A volunteer paints in the background while Dowdle gives Candy Sheehan instructions for spackling the garage. Cathy Green (in pink shirt) joined Sheehan in her spackling duties. Second row, from left: Linda Lydia spackles the porch ceiling before painting begins while Sheron Patterson's husband, Robert, paints siding. Valdez explores one of the bedrooms in her new home.



Some of the more than 200 volunteers put finishing touches of paint on the back of the house.



April 19: Mavis Adams (wearing blue hat) and Linn carefully sand the posts on the front porch.



Linn shares a laugh with Patterson during a break.



April 26: Volunteers add the finishing touches as they sod the yard and add landscaping.



Adams (left) and Lydia ready their shovels as they wait for instructions on where to plant shrubs and flowers.



May 10: Harvey-Edwards (right) was one of many volunteers to present Valdez with a gift on dedication day.

*For more information about Breast Cancer Builds, visit Patterson's website at [www.drsheron.com/survivor](http://www.drsheron.com/survivor).*