

A Miracle in Martin County

Rural northeastern county goes Hollywood to help a family in need

By Jason King
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March 2009

The hit television series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* came to rural Martin County in early March, and in doing so, helped to bring businesses and citizens together to build a home for a family that has battled through two disabilities.

The show, now in its sixth season, has in the past featured home builds in the urban centers of Raleigh and Charlotte. This is the first in a rural part of the state.

The local businesses and volunteers who stepped up to make the build a reality were doing so to help the Cooper family - Jeff, Clara, daughter Windy and son Aaron - which has suffered tremendous hardship.

Jeff, a combat medic with the U.S. Army in the Gulf War Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm - in the early 1990s, suffers from Gulf War Syndrome and is confined to a wheelchair with serious immune disorders and multiple sclerosis. Jeff saved his son's life two years ago when Aaron was run over by a garbage truck. Aaron lost most of his right arm but has survived several surgeries since.

The family had been living in a leaky doublewide trailer with bad wiring, a sinking roof and a rotting wheelchair ramp.

The family's candidacy and selection have made for interesting times, according to County Manager Russell Overman.

Overman said the county mainly served in a support role, providing a law enforcement officer on-site to aid the show's own security team and using county transit shuttles to ferry volunteers, spectators and media to the build site. The county also waived building permit and C&D landfill fees.

Before selecting the family, the production company wanted to make sure it had the full support of the community. Overman said everything came together quickly after receiving a phone call from a Lock & Key Productions official on a Friday afternoon in January.

Overman, the county building inspector and a couple of other county officials quickly met with the show's producer.



*Martin County Manager Russell Overman, Commissioners Tommy Bowen and Derek Price, Board Chairman Ronnie Smith, Vice Chairman Butch Lilley and Clerk to the Board Linda Hardison checked out progress on an Extreme Makeover: Home Edition build on March 11.
(Photo by Jason King)*

“When he got through explaining it to us in a couple of hours, we were on board,” Overman said. Two days later, “the builder was in, and we knew it was on.”

The Cooper family knew it was in consideration for the build but had no idea how far along things had progressed until they received a wake-up call from the show's star, Ty Pennington, the morning of March 6. He and the show's stars/designers and a television crew were parked outside their home.

Two days later, their doublewide was demolished. Producers “fired” rounds from a Civil War-era cannon at the home to make it appear as if the home was being blown up. Roughly 200 volunteers participated in the show's *Braveheart* March - named after the battle scenes from the 1995 flick *Braveheart* - to a cheering crowd of spectators.

Overman said filming the march took three takes.

“It was all Hollywood on Sunday,” Overman said.

The Cooper family got its first look at the home after 7 p.m. on March 13.



On Monday morning, the race was on to have the house built by Friday afternoon - a whirlwind 106-hour window that had volunteers in blue Extreme Makeover T-shirts working at a fever pace around the clock.

Overman's son, West, was among those working the nightshift. West, serving as a project manager, is a graduate of East Carolina University's construction management program. Current students in the program served as project team leaders and volunteers.

The Cooper family was sent on vacation to Washington, D.C. for the week of the build and returned to a surprise on “Move That Bus” day, when the family returned to the site and saw their new home for the first time.

The show will air Sunday, May 3, at 8 p.m. on ABC affiliates.

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