

'Freedom Builders' help repair homes and lives

BY HEATHER JOHNSON
DUROCHER

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In the past six years, Jay and his family have lost a home, endured countless medical procedures and struggled to make ends meet.

But to hear the Traverse City man tell it, these aren't so much hardships as they are "challenges."

Jay, who didn't want his last name used in this article, said it was Freedom Builders that "gave me hope for a better day tomorrow."

And because of one local group, he, his wife Dottie and their two young sons haven't faced all of these trying times alone.

"I call them the modern-day disciple," Jay said of Freedom Builders of America, a non-profit Christian-based organization that takes on housing repair projects for those in need. The Traverse City-based group, which started in 1999, serves both renters and home owners in Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties.

Jay credits Skip Brown, the group's founder and executive director, with helping his family through

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Skip Brown, Freedom Builders of America Founder

an especially rough patch.

He met Brown and other Freedom Builders volunteers this past winter, when his family's electric bill grew too expensive. A stay-at-home dad to his two sons since a work-related injury in 1998 left him unable to work, Jay realized his wife's

paycheck from her job as a nurse's aide couldn't cover the nearly \$400 bill on top of their growing medical bills and living expenses.

Jay knew something had to change to lower their bill, but didn't know how he'd make it happen.

"We needed our electric water tank replaced with a gas one, and eventually our electric dryer to change to gas," Jay said.

That's where Freedom Builders stepped in.

"Skip came and took out the electric water tank," Jay said, adding that their electric bill decreased substantially after that. "It was something we could afford."

Freedom Builders takes on about 100 projects throughout the region each year, helping mostly single moms but also low-income elderly and the disabled, Brown said.

Of those projects, maybe four or five are major endeavors, such as adding rooms or taking down walls and replacing windows. The group relies on private donations and volunteer labor as well as partnerships with area churches, the community, professional trades and local agencies to complete these projects.

Freedom Builders also holds an annual golf outing each fall that raises much-needed funds.

Along with swinging hammers and wielding paintbrushes, the more than 300 folks signed on to volunteer with Freedom Builders strive to make personal connections with those they're helping.

That's been the goal since the beginning, said Brown, who helped found what was originally called More than a Carpenter Missions in 1999.

The group doesn't preach but rather reminds people of their value, they don't have to go it alone, Brown said.

"We were called to demonstrate the love of Christ to people. Nothing more, nothing less," said Brown, 53, who is the group's only paid staff member. "We have to go out and help people. We've got to make a difference."

Brown acknowledged that even he, in the early months of starting the group, had to overcome preconceived ideas about those in need.

"I thought if you could work hard enough, long enough, smart enough, you could work yourself out of

poverty. The truth is, I don't think I am alone in that (way of thinking)," he said. "But I was radically wrong. Of the over 450 projects we've done in the last six years, four of those families were not working who could have been working at the time, and that was it. The rest are disabled and couldn't work or were working families."

Terry Berden, local business owner who serves as a board member for Freedom Builders, calls his involvement "the most fulfilling thing I have ever done." "This one has its grip on me," said Berden, who began volunteering a year and a half ago. "We're working with people who have nowhere else to turn. It gives them hope that there are people out there, businesses out there that do care."

One project that stands out in Berden's mind involved a mother who had been diagnosed with cancer and was given a year to live. It was winter time and her family had no heat, only an oil lamp keeping them warm.

"It was 40 outside and I believe it was 44 degrees inside her house," Berden said.

Berden helped install a furnace and cut in duct work, all in one day. That afternoon, the kids returned to a warm house.

"The kids came home from school saying, 'Mommy, Mommy we can sleep in our room at night!' They could take their coats off in the house," Berden said. "Pretty rewarding stuff. It's those kinds of things that make you understand how good you have it."

Freedom Builders continues to add to its project list and volunteers have hopes of one day providing even more resources to those in need.

"Our long range goals would be to have a community center with affordable homes around it that folks could buy or rent," Berden said.

Until then, the group remains grateful for all that it has accomplished and for all the relationships volunteers have formed with area families.

"It's an exciting place to be," Brown said. "We look to our strength being provided by what God provides. God has blessed us."

Heather Johnson Durocher is a local freelance writer.

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