

Volunteers to renovate home of paraplegic

Companies help build Pedro Toala a new life

By BETH MILLER
The News Journal

Sometimes Yira Graciano still can't believe her strong, hard-working husband is paralyzed.

It has been 16 months since kids tipped over the portable toilet Pedro Toala was using in a Wilmington city park underneath Interstate 95. The fall broke his spine and damaged his spinal cord. He lost the use of both legs and uses a power wheelchair now.

Their lives have been upended since that June night in 2006. They have been through surgeries, physical and occupational therapies, they have been trained to use equipment Toala needs at home, and he has learned to drive a specially equipped van. They have lived in the midst of almost constant change — in their home, their routines and their roles — while trying to meet the needs of their children, 13-year-old Gale and 9-year-old Gregory.

Now they're in the midst of more mayhem as a Wilmington special-events firm leads an effort to renovate the family's split-level home.

These changes started at the Planning Factory, a firm that handles logistics for special events and this year is planning a special event of its own to mark its 25th anniversary. When CEO Cher Przelomski read about Toala's injury in *The News Journal*, she believed she and her colleagues could find business owners, contractors and other volunteers to provide the expertise, materials and labor necessary to make the Toalas' house more accessible to him and attractive for the whole family.

The Pedro Project was born, and Przelomski was right. Firms responded with architects, planners, supplies, volunteers. People signed up to help pack and paint and do other work.

See PEDRO — A2



The Pedro PROJECT

To volunteer or donate to The Pedro Project, which benefits Pedro Toala, call 656-8400 or visit www.planningfactory.com and click on "The Pedro Project."



The News Journal/JENNIFER CORRETT

The Planning Factory, a local event planning company, moves things out of the Toalas' Milltown home before renovations start in November. Several companies have stepped up to help make the house accessible for the paraplegic.

Pedro: Plans call for family to be home for the holidays

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Przelomski believes they'll meet their goal of having the family in a much better home for the holidays.

"Our goal is to have them in by Dec. 15, for Christmas — no matter what," she said. "And it's looking very doable."

The project stalled for three months as ABC-TV producers considered the Toala family for "Extreme Makeover Home Edition," in which a renovation crew tears a house down and builds a new one to suit the needs and desires of the chosen family. The process includes a thorough review of each family member, the government agencies and regulations that would be involved, as well as the story and the options available to the family.

Ultimately, ABC officials decided the Toala project already was getting the sort of community assistance that they hope to foster with their program.

"We wish we could do all of them, but we're only able to do 25 families a year," said Diane Korman, senior producer for the show. "This was simply timing. We couldn't get to them right away, and we knew that organization would help."

"We're a metaphor of neighbors helping neighbors, of the community coming together," she said. "Truth be told, you don't need us to help a family. You just need to gather your community support, your civic pride and the passion of those in the construction industry who every day are helping families without the cameras — and do your own makeover."

No ABC 'hoopla' needed

The delay was a disappointment, but work is under way now.

"You don't have to have the hoopla of ABC," said Ed Przelomski, an artist and Cher's husband. "Everybody knows someone, and all it takes is a little effort. And you don't have to depend on the government. It's like the Amish and their barn-raising."

When the project is done, the Toalas will have an additional 1,200 square feet of living space, including a ground-floor master suite with a bedroom that will accommodate both of them. The suite also will have a den, more storage, a better bathroom and wheelchair access to a new patio in the backyard, allowing Pedro to join his children when they play there.

The house also will have a lift



Pedro Toala exits from a specially equipped van he has learned to drive since he was injured in June 2006.

that will allow Pedro to get to the kitchen, dining room and living room upstairs. He'll be able to eat dinner with the family, and a door to the kitchen will be widened to allow him to cook again. Upstairs, the three bedrooms and the bathroom will be freshly painted, organized and redecorated.

A kickoff garage sale raised \$1,500 and cleared away items the Toalas didn't want to keep. Now, Graciano, Gale and Gregory are sharing one upstairs-bedroom as clothes and furniture and other items are reorganized in the others.

Nerves — especially Graciano's — are fraying as the family tries to live in the midst of the upheaval. "We can't ask for too much," she said. "They're already doing so much."

The next big step is to move everyone into temporary quarters for the 90-day period during which major renovations — new walls, new doors, new floors — are made.

The temporary lodging — needed by Thursday — must be wheelchair-accessible, furnished and located near Stanton, where Gale and Gregory go to school. Przelomski is hoping someone with a model unit in that area will catch the vision and offer it to the family.

Dave Brody of Wohlson Construction believes the pieces will fall into place. His firm is managing the project.

"After hearing Pedro's story, what could be more compelling?" Brody said.

The architects at Mitchell Associates agreed. Lou Rosenberg, one of the partners, said after meeting Toala and his family, he

ONLINE EXTRA

Watch an audio slideshow of Pedro's recovery at www.delawareonline.com.

was convinced his co-workers would want to be involved in the project.

"We had six to eight architects that stepped up," Rosenberg said. "People are good. They see a cause, figure this guy is down on his luck and say, 'What can we do to help him?'"

Tvevbaugh Associates is working on exterior improvements, including a turnaround driveway and an accessible patio. Wilkinson Builders is providing furniture from some of its model homes. Ann de Brabander said.

Manning Mills Inc. is providing new flooring and installers, according to spokeswoman Betsy Amoroso.

"It's just the right thing to do," she said.

Everyone welcome

Przelomski said more volunteers are needed — plumbers, electricians, roofers, laborers — and are welcome to join the effort. She also would welcome advice from those who have experience with spinal cord injuries and the kinds of items that are most helpful for people who have them.

It's not the first time folks have chipped in to help the Toala family.

Before Toala could come home from the hospital, volunteers installed a roll-in bathroom and a bedroom on the ground floor, which became his two-room living quarters.

Donations to the Pedro Toala Fund helped the family, and schools, church groups and businesses collect gifts and money for the family. A government fund for victims of violent crimes helped Toala buy a specially equipped van to help the popular former DART bus driver get back on the road.

Now, he can drive himself to his job as an information specialist for DART.

The upheavals take their toll, but Toala and his family hope it all will be worth it eventually.

"Just be patient," he said. "That's what I tell my wife. Of course, she may say I'm too patient."

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