

Local

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Two 'lucky' families

Earthquake victims will soon have homes

By LEE ROMNEY
STAFF WRITER

When the Gallegos' rented home on Grove Street collapsed in the October 1989 earthquake, Teresa, Jorge and their three children first moved to the Salvation Army; then to a FEMA trailer; then to a Main Street apartment with the help of county rent vouchers, never knowing when they would have to pick up and move again.

"We were thrown from one side to the other," said Teresa, who moved to Watsonville from the Mexican state of Jalisco 15 years ago with her husband.

Before the earthquake, they paid \$150 a month in rent; after the quake they could find nothing for less than \$600, Teresa said.

While this nightmare may sound familiar to dozens of Watsonville residents, for the Gallegos and Camposano families, it may actually be coming to an end.

The two families were chosen from a pool of 93 applicants to move into a duplex now being built by "Habitat for Humanity" housing activists at 924 Lincoln St.

"We won the lottery," Guillermina Camposano said last night at an Aptos church dinner, looking around incredulously at the room full of volunteers from across the country who have gathered in Watsonville for a week of intensive building as part of Habitat for Humanity's 15th anniversary.

The organization's volunteers, who number 120,000 worldwide, have built 10,000 homes for the needy in neighborhoods from Zaire to Atlanta, Ga. The group hopes to build its second 10,000 in the next 18 months, said Geoff Van Loucks, board of director's president for Habitat International. Their shorter-term goal: to build 1,500 homes across America during 15 weeks this summer.

The organization completed several houses in Soquel in September 1989, and built a house behind Watsonville's Pajaro Valley Shelter in October 1990. A new project will soon get under way in Live Oak, and six or seven more Watsonville homes are in the planning for the Atkinson Lane area.

While the Camposano and



Kurt Ellison

Jose and Guillermina Camposano, left, and Teresa and Jorge Gallegos stand with their children in front of the home being built for them.

Gallegos families may feel blessed, their good fortune does not stem from luck alone, said Vince Lyddane, who headed the 14-member Watsonville selection committee.

The committee scrutinized earthquake damage, family income and family size, then moved on to finer points: how democratically the families were run, whether parents shared responsibilities, and how much they volunteered in the community.

Guillermina Camposano, who came from the Mexican state of Michoacan in 1984, works a night shift at the J. M. Smucker plant, but has somehow managed to find time to help out with field trips at Hyde Elementary School, where her older daughters — 12-year-old Patty and 6-year-old Lucy — go. Their youngest is 4-year-old Yesenia. Three years ago, Guillermina also volunteered her time at a local food bank; she is now studying English along with her husband, Jose Luis.

Jose Luis has worked in Watsonville's fields since he arrived from Jalisco 15 years ago. This month, he's harvesting flowers, but every Tuesday and Saturday since he got the good news, he has been at the Lincoln Street site, helping with construction.

With the help of county vouchers, the family now pays \$569 a month for rent. The two-bedroom duplex will run them closer to \$375 a month, interest free, for 25 years, but the permanence and responsibility of owning a home are welcome.

"We never want to go anywhere else," said Jose Luis. "We love it here."

The family is small and close knit — both left extended families in Mexico.

Teresa Gallegos also acknowledges that owning a house means the responsibilities of maintaining it, a task normally left to landlords, but a gift house is not something to shy away from.

"It's something that everybody wants," she said.

She fidgeted nervously before Estella Mejia — a selection-committee member who will help the family through the moving-in process — introduced them to the dozens of Habitat for Humanity volunteers who came to the church for a kickoff barbecue dinner.

"We practiced at home," she said jokingly, referring to the media blitz the group has planned for the week of building.

Other Habitat for Humanity workers have been quietly putting the house together for a month and a half, Mejia said, and will continue to build through the fall, when the families are expected to move in.

Teresa also works a night shift at a strawberry-packing plant, and Jorge, from Michoacan, farms lettuce. He also volunteers his time at the YMCA child-care center. Teresa volunteers in her children's school and served on the earthquake-relief committee, and both are taking courses in English as a Second Language.

The Gallegos' eldest daughter, 11-year-old Noemi, is in Mexico visiting her grandfather, but 10-year-old Jorge Jr., and their 4-year-old daughter, also named Yesenia, were present.

The Camposano children, the younger ones decked out in matching polka-dot dresses, played with their complimentary Habitat for Humanity hats and got to know the Gallegos' daughter a little better last night, poking each other's faces and tugging on the tablecloth.

While the families first met each other while living in FEMA trailers, they will now be neighbors for life.