

Hammer, Nails, Paint and Love

Chris and Mary Provence remodel vacant houses for needy families. Their Christian compassion is renovating Indianapolis.

The modest, wood-frame house about two miles northeast of downtown Indianapolis doesn't look like a mansion.

Twin porches being converted into one give evidence of a duplex that once housed two families. Across the street a wooden fence partly shields a line of 16 dump trucks.

Though it may not feature suburbia's manicured gloss, this home represents a dream fulfilled for the single mother who now occupies it.

"This means accomplishment," says Danielle Bouquett, a 32-year-old mother of three. "It shows my children a positive role model, and we'll have more space, hallelujah!"

Around the southern edge of an area known as Reagan Park, shouts of joy are common these days. Three years after its founding, Rebuilding the Wall—a small ministry with a God-sized vision—is starting to transform this neighborhood with a new style of urban renewal.

Instead of displacing the poor with high-priced redevelopment, Rebuilding the Wall enables them to sink deeper roots into their neighborhood by moving into refurbished houses. In January the ministry completed its first project—a transitional unit for families awaiting more permanent

quarters.

Founders Chris and Mary Provence plan to complete two more homes by December while acquiring four other properties. All will be refurbished by a volunteer army of lawyers, accountants, engineers and others who donate Saturdays to help low-income residents become homeowners.

The ministry hopes to reduce the area's 31 percent vacancy rate. Its five-year master plan calls for completing 20 renovated houses (all to be owned by low-income residents), six transitional homes and seven rentals units.

Most of Reagan Park's property owners don't live in the community, according to Chris Provence, whose shock of brown hair and boyish face belie his 32 years.

"But our goal is not just home ownership," says Provence, who gained his construction experience as a Navy Seabee. "A lot of people work with folks who could do it on their own with a little help. We work with folks who don't qualify for Habitat [for Humanity]. We only do rehabs—we rehab vacant houses.

"Our desire is to stabilize families at below-market rents to allow them to build savings and a budget until they're ready to buy a house."

Ultimately, the former businessman hopes to boost the home-ownership rate from 40 percent to 70 percent. His dream is that no one will be able to distinguish the resident who makes \$100,000 a year from the one who lives on \$20,000 a year.

Provence has been the ministry's only paid employee for its first three years (he recently hired a construction manager), as well as its motivating force. Yet the roots of Rebuilding the Wall lie in the quiet witness of his wife, Mary.

She was a former social worker when she moved into the neighborhood in 1996 to begin weekly children's Bible studies. Her future spouse was living in a house at the other end of the block owned by his business partner. Provence and several drug dealers consumed prodigious quantities of crack cocaine there.

Though he was co-owner of a mortgage company and earned \$100,000 a year, Chris spent most of his money on drugs. In dramatic fashion he kicked the habit cold turkey after meeting Mary in 1998 and going on a retreat sponsored by her church.

Although he showed up high on drugs to begin the weekend, Chris realized during a communion service that his habit would kill him. He went home, evicted the dealers and soon felt drawn to youth ministry.

Selling his half of the business, he took another job for a much lesser salary. He also fell in love with Mary. The couple married five months after the retreat.

During a conference in 2000 sponsored by the Christian Community Development Association, God gave Chris a vision of the body of Christ taking care of its own.

"I saw exactly what the Bible calls love," he says. "We're loving our neighbor as ourselves, doing things so if anybody has a need, that need is met, not doing anything out of

selfish gain and not living in luxury or indulgence.”

Although her husband’s story is miraculous, Mary says there are many people in their neighborhood with similar stories of survival—residents who turned their lives around.

The Provences (with 2-year-old son Jaytel) are one of two white families in an African-American neighborhood. Some might see them as unique, but Mary, the daughter of a former Baptist pastor, shrugs her shoulders when asked about crossing racial boundaries.

“We believe all people are valuable, whether red, black, white, educated or noneducated,” Mary says. “Our neighborhood is fabulous. People are wonderful. We learn so much from them. One motivating force is if you love people, you want them to have a good home.”

You also want them to have a peaceful neighborhood. When Mary bought the couple’s two-story house it still bore a bullet hole from a drive-by shooting.

Terri Broyhill, who grew up in the neighborhood and returned in 1986, got angry when she saw drug deals going on under streetlights or prostitutes plying their trade. That changed after Mary encouraged her to pray for those who were upsetting her.

When Broyhill did, she started seeing them as desperate people forced into survival mode. Among those she interceded for is a former streetwalker who has sobered up and become gainfully employed.

"Now the neighborhood is wonderful," Broyhill says. "I feel so good."

"What [Mary] and Chris are called to do has blessed my life unbelievably," says another neighbor, Veronica Manuel. "People we meet by being part of their lives are incredible."

Volunteer workers from more upscale environments also are blessed by the experience.

"This gave me a different perspective in life," says Wing Lau, who despite his Chinese heritage attends a mostly white church. "Normally I don't interact with people in daily life who are different from me."

For Greg Wiesman, an engineer who grew up in the suburbs, volunteering showed him a world he hadn't seen. "I can identify with the issues of the urban poor and understand better what they come up against," he says.

Although several crews working on renovations hail from the Provinces' former church, not all the volunteers are Christians. Among those helping this year is a group from Indianapolis Ambassadors, a volunteer service organization that sponsors charity fund-raisers and benevolence projects.

"I just think it's a neat thing he's doing here for people who need houses," says Stan Curts as he scrapes debris off a trowel. "Personally, I'm not the least bit religious, so that plays no part in it."

Rebuilding the Wall also draws high marks from Keep

Indianapolis Beautiful, a nonprofit agency founded in 1976. It supplies the ministry with trash containers for discarded materials. Program manager Lisa Laflin says the ministry augments Habitat for Humanity's new-home construction projects and helps a local agency that assists seniors and low-income residents with minor home repairs.

"I think what they're doing is incredible," Laflin says. "It meets a need that's not necessarily being met. They've got a niche that's very unique."

The Provences, though living on a fraction of their former income—which Mary says helps them identify with their neighbors—aren't bothered by their lack of material prosperity.

To compensate, they are rich in relationships. Folks who gather on porches call out, "Hi, Chris!" as he surveys renovations, or pop in the door with greetings such as: "Mary! We just got two parakeets!"

"Every day I sit back and say, 'Wow, I had no idea this would happen,'" Chris says, smiling. "I'm sitting back and watching God work, like everybody else."

Freelance writer Ken Walker lives in Louisville, Kentucky. He visited several Rebuilding the Wall renovation sites.

You can support this ministry by sending tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Rebuild the Wall, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248. For more information call 317-250-7090 or visit .