

Taking It to the **Extreme**

A team of builders, a community of volunteers and one deserving family add up to Tucson's spotlight moment on a top-rated TV show.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS VENEKLASEN AND ROBIN STANCLIFF

The story of a deserving family in need of a new home is always the focus of ABC's TV show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The details of the build provide the drama, as before our eyes, a community constructs a house in less than a week.

When the show came to Tucson, the spotlight was on the Bell family, including Lizzie, a lovely teenager and American Red Cross hero, who lives with a rare, potentially fatal blood condition and has a passion for fashion design.

The episode aired last March, and despite what was captured on screen, there were things you didn't see: competitors working together; cold nights sleeping in cars or on the ground; businesses giving without expectation and every worker doing whatever it took to change one girl's life.

"Everyone refused to let it *not* work," says Zac Sharpe, one of seven builders under the helm of John Wesley Miller, who helped create a new home for the Bell family. "No one was going to let it fail."

It wasn't hard to find the motivation. The Bells have worked so tirelessly to help others and to take care of Lizzie, who has Diamond Blackfan anemia, that their own home was decaying beneath them, aided by mold, termites and a cracked foundation.

Miller, a renowned local and national leader in green building practices, was chosen to lead the project, and his team had just 106 hours to finish. The board of directors he assembled was comprised of friends and competitors, including Zac Sharpe, Rich Michal of Adolfsen & Peterson Construction, Art Flagg of Arizona Flagg Realty & Development, Al LeCocq of A.B. LeCocq Construction, architect Hank Krzysik and many others. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Mesquite trees were pruned to allow access during renovation; Volunteers removed items the first day, preparing the area for demolition; Many original items from the home were donated or recycled; John Wesley Miller (left), Hank Krzysik (middle) and Art Flagg (right) lead the team for the makeover. Photos by Thomas Veneklasen.





A first glimpse of the Bells' new dining room. Photo by Robin Standliff.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A portrait of the Bell family as they arrive home after their trip; The newly designed kitchen area; The remodeled living room. Photos by Robin Stancliff.

“With the situation the housing industry is in, I wasn’t sure everyone would accept, but they did,” says Miller. “The builders were high quality, really neat guys. It was phenomenal.”

With almost 1,500 people laboring on the project in some way, the massive effort produced not just a stunning new home, but the first in the nation to be green verified under the new National Association of Home Builders’ guidelines. It features concrete floors, solar electric and hot water, rainwater harvesting tanks and many other Earth-friendly amenities. Donated goods and services for the home are estimated between \$1.1 and \$1.3 million.

“For a month beforehand, we met to figure it all out,” explains Michal. “The big thing was lining up the materials. We had to get everything donated. Then, finding the labor and coordinating the schedule.”

Michal spent the first night — the first of many — sleeping upright with two other workers in a truck, waiting for concrete to get poured the next day. He and the other builders would then work long shifts at the site. Most of those shifts went well past 12 hours, he says.

“We were all tired and freezing, but everyone had a smile on his face,” Michal recalls. “I remember saying to the owner of the concrete company, ‘I still need you to pour this fitting.’ He said, ‘OK, great.’ They made sure the work was done.”

Building a home for a TV show proved quite a paradox. Workers often had to stop progress on construction so the cameras could recapture the moments for TV, yet it

was the show that prompted the project, so everyone complied and made it work, Sharpe says.

By Super Bowl Sunday, the crew was roughly 14 hours behind schedule. But the producers set up TVs and arranged food for the workers, and in the final hours no one left. Electricians slept for a few hours, then worked again. Drywall crews napped in the kitchen. The tile workers were on site for three days straight.

Helping to feed the workers and volunteers was Pima County Recorder F. Ann Rodriguez. She had just finished an exhausting election in November when her friend Miller asked her to attend a pre-planning meeting. A few hours later, after hearing Lizzie’s story, she was on board.

“I had no idea about this young lady,” Rodriguez says. Lizzie’s condition requires her to get blood transfusions every few weeks. She has become a treasured American Red Cross advocate for blood donations as she candidly shares her story across the community.

“As human beings, we often only think about what is impacting us. Here’s Lizzie, worrying about the person next to her. I thought, ‘I can rest later,’” recalls Rodriguez.

And so volunteers poured in from across the city to help. Their stories from the site are both touching and funny.

One laborer had fallen on hard times himself and had previously applied to the *Extreme Makeover* show, but he wanted to help and ended up building several new beds. “This is an extremely giving

community. Even in a recession, you have people willing to lend a hand,” Sharpe adds.

An attorney and friend of Miller’s showed up and asked how he could help. Miller told him he could pick up trash. “He said, ‘I’ll do it,’” says Miller. “I’ve never seen anything that quite compares to this.”

Builder Art Flagg recalls racing to Home Depot for quarter-inch drywall in the last 24 hours of the build only to lose the sheets off his truck, more than once, on the way back.

“When I rounded the corner at River and Craycroft going north, I saw sheets of drywall on the pavement,” Flagg says. “I stopped, retrieved them and noticed that only half of the load was there. So, I got in the truck and backtracked.

“Forever, the Bell house will have some sheets of drywall that have tire marks on the back side,” he says. “It was not funny then, but it is now.”

Professional organizer MaryLynn St. Germaine, who with members of Tucson Professional Organizers helped sort and put away the Bells’ possessions, described the site as an “ant hill” with people coming in and out continuously. She was amazed at the sheer volume of gift baskets, books, furniture and other donated goods.

“This new home was perfectly stocked,” St. Germaine says. “Everything you could imagine, from food in the pantry to new sponges in the kitchen.”

When it was over, everyone was both elated and exhausted. But at least one man doesn’t want the feeling to end. Sharpe, with Anthony Avila of Jade Concrete, Inc., plans to launch Angels of Construction, a foundation to help needy families with small projects. “If you can provide a kitchen for a single mom of three who can’t afford it, what a difference that could make in her life.” **HG**

For more information, see The Source on page 45.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The demolition begins the night of Day One. Photo by Robin Stancliff; Cranes get the framework in place; Television host Ty Pennington greets the crowd the day of the taping of *Extreme Makeover*. Photos by Julie Jenkins, Centric Photo; The finishing touches to the landscaping as Day Seven ends; The stucco phase begins as the work progresses round the clock; Work continues inside and out as lights illuminate the construction at night. Photos by Robin Stancliff.