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Out of the ashes

Dozens of volunteers help Pam Strickland and her family reconstruct the home they lost

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RALEIGH - With the help of a lot of generous friends, Pam Strickland and her family finally returned home Saturday, 16 months after a fire destroyed their house.

After the blaze that had cost them their possessions and the life of Strickland's daughter's fiance, they were greeted by a new 2,400-square-foot home. They were joined by dozens of people, including volunteers who donated their time to rebuild the home for free.

"I'm speechless," Strickland said in a choked-up voice as she received the keys from Steve Raper, the Raleigh commercial contractor who spearheaded the rebuilding effort. "I didn't think this day would come. We really appreciate all of this."

Strickland was more than happy to show off the new house to relatives, friends and those who had helped in the rebuilding. Strickland's 13-month-old grandson, Jordan, scampered across the hardwood floors and around the stairwell as the volunteers saw what their handiwork had produced.

"It's better than what I imagined it would be," said Lauren Massey, Strickland's 24-year-old daughter and Jordan's mother.

The situation was far bleaker on the morning of Sept. 16, 2006, when a fire broke out on the front porch of the home south of Garner near the Johnston County line. The blaze woke Massey, who was six months pregnant, and her fiance, Robert Curtis McCarty.

McCarty is credited with rushing the others outside to safety. But he didn't make it out himself.

The fire forced the family to move to a small apartment in Garner as they struggled to find a way to rebuild. Strickland's efforts were hampered by a thin insurance settlement that would have only allowed them to build a home smaller than the one that burned.

Fortunately for the family, Massey mentioned the problem to Raper. Massey takes care of Raper's younger

children.

Raper, vice president of GR&S Inc., agreed to donate his company's time and labor toward rebuilding the house. He also enlisted the help of other companies involved in the construction business who donated materials and labor. The result is a new house that's 600 square feet bigger than the original.

"It's amazing what a community can do when it comes together," Raper said.

Jason Atkins, head of A.L.M. Contracting, donated his company's time to landscape the house.

"I'd do this again in a heartbeat," Atkins said. "The way I look at it is, we can save them \$5,000 to \$6,000 that they can use on furniture or other things."

The family is trying to move on from the fire.

Strickland is allowing Massey and Jordan to stay in the new house while Massey attends classes at Wake Technical Community College. Massey wants to complete her courses to get a job in radiology.

Also living in the house are Strickland's 16-year-old son and her fiance.

Still, moving into their new home Saturday was bittersweet.

Massey couldn't help remembering that her room is directly above where the fire started that killed her fiancée. "I'll have to get used to it," she said.

Strickland, 51, remembers all she lost as she looked at her new home. The fire destroyed heirlooms and mementoes, including most of the family photos, the antique china handed down from her mother and grandmother and Massey's beauty pageant trophies.

"It does change your life," Strickland said. "You place a different perspective on things."

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