

Program adds fresh coat of paint to homes

By Tatiana Sanchez
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INDIO — Dolores Perez waits inside her dimly lit home as volunteers crowd her front lawn, paint brushes in hand. The paint should be dry any minute now.

Perez, a 46-year-old mother of three, said city officials knocked on her door one day and offered her an application for a program known as “A Brush with Kindness.” They reached out at the perfect time.

Since coming to Indio in 1998 from Guanajuato, Mexico, Perez and her husband have struggled financially. While her husband, a gardener, was unemployed for two years, Dolores, a caretaker, was the sole breadwinner of the five-person household. They faced threats of foreclosure in 2009.

For Perez and her family, the volunteers are like “angels,” she said.

“I was telling my husband last night that I won’t believe it until I see it,” she said with a laugh.

Two small homes in Indio now stand in the sunshine with a bright, fresh paint job. The homes, within a half-mile of each other, were transformed in just a few hours Thursday, with the help of 85 Habitat for Humanity volunteers looking to do a good deed.

Greg Gaskill, executive director of Habitat for Humanity in the Coachella Valley, said the program is unique because residents see an immedi-



Volunteers Shanna Igbodo, right, and Russel Read, left, paint a house Thursday as part of the “A Brush with Kindness” program. OMAR ORNELAS/DESERT SUN

ate improvement in their homes, as do volunteers.

“They’re tired, they’re dirty, but at the end of the day they have the satisfaction of saying, ‘Look at what we accomplished today,’” he said.

Though the nationwide program to help low-income families has been around for 15 years, it’s fairly new to Indio, said Scott Trujillo, Indio’s senior neighborhood coordinator.

Trujillo works with Habitat for Humanity to find families who would be a proper fit for the program. After providing a list of potential candidates, Trujillo and Habitat representatives visit the homeowners and offer an application, which is then reviewed and verified for financial need.

Individuals are chosen based on the condition of their home and the cost it would take to bring the house up to neighborhood standards, compared to their ability (or lack

thereof) to pay that cost.

This year the volunteers were Kaiser Permanente employees from all over California.

“We were looking for organizations in the area that could use the help,” said Michael Divic, Kaiser’s community benefit project director. Divic said this project is different because it’s not about building something from scratch, but re-creating it.

Volunteers showed up at 83-160 Circle Drive just before 9 a.m. They wore cozy T-shirts, baseball caps and sunglasses. A cool breeze drifted through the neighborhood.

Large buckets of yellow and white paint, brushes of all sizes, and busy chatter filled the perimeter of the small house.

“Paint coming through!” warned a volunteer carrying a plastic tray filled with butter-yellow paint.

Jean Martinez looked on as the volunteers quickly transformed the

exterior of the home she’s owned for nearly 30 years. Martinez is a lifelong resident of Indio. She remembers the close-knit feeling the city had growing up as a kid, and she remembers the feeling she got when she saw her current home for the first time.

“It was a charming little house,” she said. Martinez recently finished putting her youngest daughter through college, which was a priority for her and her husband.

It’s evident that Martinez still sees the charm in Indio and in her home. A smile creeps on her face when she thinks about what the exterior of her house will look like with its brand-new paint job.

“I think it’s special,” she said.

“It’s nice that there’s an opportunity to touch base with old neighborhoods. I’m really passionate about Indio.”

A few blocks down, other volunteers used a brick red to paint the exterior of Perez’s modest home on Ruby Avenue.

But she can still hardly believe it. Perez is a quiet woman with a timid demeanor. But this doesn’t conceal her awe for the volunteers and her appreciation.

“I don’t know how I can repay them for their work,” she said.

Volunteer Christine Presley can’t wait until the third coat of paint dries on Perez’s home.

Presley thinks Perez will be all smiles when she sees her house.

“It’s amazing what a little paint will do,” she said.