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# THE HELPING HAND THESE DAYS OFTEN HOLDS A NEW HOUSE

House-gifting has become a major philanthropic trend in the US, in part fueled by reality TV shows. By Patrik Jonsson | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor from the January 28, 2008 edition

**ATLANTA** - After the big unveiling of her new house in Goffstown, N.H., a funny thought kept popping into Kelly Herod's head: "There's no food here to feed the kids."

Going from squalid house, or even no house, to the mansion of one's dreams is an increasingly common, and often disorienting, experience for disaster-stricken American families such as the Herods. Their home washed away last Memorial Day when the Piscataquog River left its banks. "I thought, 'I can't believe these people are going to build a house for nothing,' " says Ms. Herod.

As big storms have exposed gaps in federal assistance for housing, house-gifting – a modern take on barn raising – has become a major philanthropic trend in the US, experts say. Home-focused reality TV shows have helped fuel the trend and give it more visibility. Faith-based groups are among those picking up the hammers and making other key contributions.

In the past few years, more than a thousand families have received essentially free homes from New Hampshire to Mississippi.

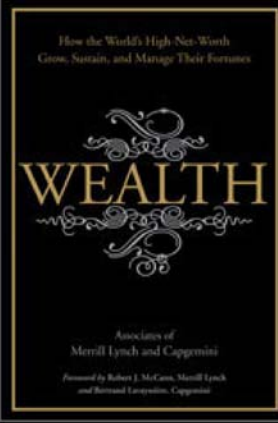
"We used to give people money toward college. Now, we give them a house," says Dana Heller, a humanities professor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., and author of "The Great American Transformation."

It's tough to nail down statistics on house-gifting, but housing experts see the movement gaining momentum, especially in light of the subprime-mortgage crisis. In addition, the number of working families who have critical housing needs is some 5.2 million today – an increase of 73 percent from 1997, according to the National Housing Conference. (Critical needs are defined as dilapidated conditions or when more than half of income goes toward housing.)

Though Habitat for Humanity requires homeowners to take out a mortgage, the organization has experienced the same kind of growth as in the gifted sector, experts say. Habitat has built 32,305 homes in the United States since 2001, more than doubling its building pace.

"While the federal government has been pretty static in its response [to housing needs], the willingness to do something at the local level seems to be growing," says Conrad Egan, president of the National Housing Conference, which advocates affordable housing. "In some ways, it's not surprising that churches and neighborhood groups are trying to figure out ways to respond to particular situations."

From foundation to finish, houses are going up – sometimes in a day. A faith-based effort in East Biloxi, Miss., has built 650 homes for people who didn't qualify for the state's rebuilding program. Last Wednesday, officials cut the ribbon on six new and free homes in Bay St. Louis, Miss. Dozens of homes have been gifted in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. Although volunteer groups have tried to centralize relief in the Gulf Coast, project managers there say they often hear of "guerrilla builders" quietly hammering up a house and slinking away without fanfare.



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But where the Gulf Coast is rife with storm victims, personal tragedies bring the nail guns out, too. North Carolina builders recently refurbished a home for an injured Iraq war veteran and, in Snellville, Ga., volunteers came up with the cash this fall to buy a new house for Arquevious "Q" Crane, a well-liked football player who was paralyzed during a game last October.

"We modified the bathrooms, widened the doors, furnished the home for him and his family, and completely remodeled a whole bathroom and ramps – all in a week's time," says Chris Snell, who runs a construction company and is also quadriplegic.

Swinging perhaps the biggest hammer is the show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," which recently aired its 100th episode. It was scheduled to feature the Herods Jan. 27. The show, led by a lanky carpenter named Ty Pennington, weaves real-life fairy tales from personal tragedies, ending in emotional meltdowns when the order to "Move that bus!" reveals that a leaky ranch has been replaced by a sprawling hacienda.

"We are returning to a time where communities take care of themselves," says Denise Cramsey, executive producer of the show, in an on-location phone call from New Mexico.

Some housing experts see it as entirely appropriate for private and charity groups to step onto the scaffolding, since the benefits – whether from promotion for corporations or quality of life for families – tend to be generally mutual. "No one is really getting hurt here," says Stephen Peca, a real estate professor at New York University.

Not everyone agrees. Some critics aren't happy with personal tragedies being sold as utopian fairy tales to consumers. And sometimes even the most well-intentioned plans go awry.

Recently, a family in Biloxi had to turn down a new house because they couldn't pay insurance rates that had gone up by 300 percent. For others, a spiffier place can also mean more complicated upkeep. And some observers note a peculiar phenomenon: Few of the house recipients in Biloxi, for example, are doing much to help their neighbors once the keys are handed over.

Some also point out that house-gifting falls far short as a tactic to significantly reduce housing anxieties in the US. "For every one family that needs a house that gets one, there are hundreds of thousands that could use a house that don't get one," says Robert Thompson, a pop-culture professor at Syracuse University in New York.

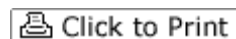
The depth of the need is often what sparks house-building projects, says Professor Heller at Old Dominion. Take the Cranes in Snellville, who had no resources to modify their old home for a wheelchair. And by the end of the flooding, the Herods in Goffstown still had to pay on a \$130,000 mortgage note, even though they had no house and had received only \$3,000 in insurance compensation.

For volunteers, the ultimate appeal may be less about building and more about how giving changes their own lives.

"There are so many benefits that you forget that someone actually gets in a house," says Paula Young, director of No Place Like Home in Rochester, N.H. The organization is using high school vo-tech students to build nine free homes in New Hampshire and Louisiana.

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