

Ortiz family lays foundation in La Grange, with some help

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Celebrate service this National Volunteer Week, April 7-13

AUSTIN, Texas — Jessica Ortiz and her family lost everything in Hurricane Harvey. The storm's historic flood filled their mobile home in La Grange, Texas, to within 18 inches of the ceiling, turning everything "muddy, smelly and gross."

She and her three kids spent September and October 2017 living with a friend in San Antonio, then moved into a hotel provided through FEMA for about five months, then moved into a FEMA mobile housing unit, which they occupied through March 27 of this year.

Ortiz struggled to find an affordable place to live in La Grange, but she was reluctant to leave.

"I thought of relocating, but the kids were like, 'Mom, our friends. Mom, [please]. Mom, no,'" she said. "And I just love it here. It's a quiet town, everybody knows everybody, great community, great schools."

Ortiz had flood insurance and used her settlement to buy a piece of land in La Grange. She planned to place a new mobile home on the lot, which she said was a better option financially than moving back to their old trailer park.



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But she never got that mobile home. Instead, she and her kids received the gift of a lifetime — a brand new house erected on their land, largely through the contributions of people they had never met before.

“Volunteers really feel gratification when they see the family has a home to live in,” said Tom Fry, a crew leader for Mennonite Disaster Services (MDS). “It’s really heartwarming to be a part of that for a family that, in many cases, could not afford to have a home.”

Fry, who lives in Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania, spent March in La Grange and Fayette County, living and working with other MDS volunteers. Including Ortiz’ house, he helped finish four homes previous volunteer groups had started. MDS provided some of the materials to build those homes, while donations to partners like the Fayette County Disaster Recovery Team (DRT) funded the rest.

“I look around the community at all the progress we’ve made since Harvey ... and ultimately what really made the biggest difference in our recovery was the volunteers that showed up to help us,” said Joy Cameron, vice president and executive director of the DRT.

FEMA has given the DRT valuable information and guidance, she said, and has helped make connections with other useful organizations. But that’s not enough on its own.

“Government agencies are great, but it’s the volunteer agencies that do the work,” Cameron said. “We’ve got some great projects in the works, but without the volunteers, they’re just ideas.”



Throughout communities in Texas and Louisiana, volunteers have been turning ideas into homes and other signs of recovery ever since Harvey. Survivors say they are immeasurably grateful for those volunteers, but unfortunately the volunteers do not get the recognition they deserve most weeks of the year.

April 7-13 is designated this year as National Volunteer Week, an opportunity to celebrate people who give selflessly and inspire us through service.

“Hurricane Harvey hit our community so hard that not any one organization can resolve it,” said Leonard Leffler, president of Fayette County Habitat for Humanity. “We’re doing our part by building homes for survivors ... and fortunately we’ve had people from Austin and other communities come to help us, some of them on a regular basis.”

The flow of volunteers has slowed considerably since the early days after Harvey, when Cameron said it was common to see 1,000 people come help. Committing to long-term volunteerism is a huge burden, she said, but it’s a bigger blessing: “I think that I’ve gotten more out of it as a volunteer than any of the families we’ve helped.”

But Cameron may never know what it feels like to be handed keys to a new home built out of the kindness of others.

“I never thought [I’d] be in a situation to lose everything at once and start off from scratch — from a couple of pair of shoes to building everything back up again,” Ortiz said March 27. “It’s been a long road, and we’re so grateful and so thankful that we have this beautiful home — that it’s ours. That we get to come and say,



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‘We’re home. We’re home.’”

View a video on this topic at www.facebook.com/FEMAharvey.

For additional information on Hurricane Harvey and Texas recovery, visit the Hurricane Harvey disaster web page at www.fema.gov/disaster/4332, Facebook at www.facebook.com/FEMAharvey, the FEMA Region 6 Twitter account at www.twitter.com/FEMARegion6 or the Texas Division of Emergency Management website at <https://www.dps.texas.gov/dem/>.



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