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Frank and Tracy Slaughter of Penn Hills are rewarded with a visit from 'Extreme Makeover: Home Edition'

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By Gretchen McKay, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Andy Starnes

"Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" host Ty Pennington stands outside the Slaughter home in Penn Hills.

A Penn Hills couple who have spent many hours helping those less fortunate turn their lives around is about to get a giant helping hand of their own.

A little before 10 a.m. yesterday, Ty Pennington and his TV crew from "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" knocked on Frank and Tracy Slaughter's front door on Grandview Avenue and with a bullhorn, delivered this good news: They'd been selected for a total home makeover by producers of the popular ABC reality show.

More than 600 volunteers working round-the-clock are expected to chip in over the course of the weeklong build, which will come to a close about 2 p.m. on Friday.

During construction, the Slaughters, both 44, and their five children will enjoy a vacation in Disney World, compliments of the ABC-TV show.

"It is such a blessing," said Mrs. Slaughter while her husband chatted with Mr. Pennington on the front porch of their 80-year-old two-bedroom house, a giant boom microphone looming above them. A small cadre of production assistants and private security guards made sure everyone else kept their distance.

"We're so overwhelmed and excited," she continued. She shook her head and grinned. "I still can't believe it."

Producers of the long-running feel-good home improvement show are bombarded with thousands of applications each month. Each episode features a deserving family that can't afford to renovate its severely damaged or run-down home.

Led by the crew of TV designers, a horde of contractors, builders and community volunteers join forces to tear down the offending structure and build a new dream house with donated materials in an awe-inspiring whirl of activity.

The family's story, which was submitted by Mrs. Slaughter's youngest sister, Joanne Garcia of Tampa, is particularly uplifting.

Mr. Slaughter today is a sergeant with the Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections, and has worked at the jail since 1997.

But 15 years ago, he was incarcerated there for a short time on an assault charge. Upon getting out, he vowed to turn his life around and became a deacon at his church. He also implemented a program at the jail that helps inmates find jobs before they're released and helps coordinate mentors for the men at his church.

Mrs. Slaughter, who served 6¹/₂ years as a radioman in the Navy, mentors single mothers and provides care for children, seniors and the homeless at their home, which sits at the end of a quiet dead-end street.

Battered a few years ago by gale-force winds, the rear of the house is partially wrapped in a tarp because of heavy water damage. All five children share one small bedroom, with just a curtain to separate their four daughters, ages 2 to 15, from their 10-year-old son.

"Everything needs to be done," said Mrs. Slaughter, who purchased the house 13 years ago. "It's falling apart."

Fans of the show may be tempted to immediately head to the Grandview Avenue property for a quick look-see. And according to producers, they're certainly welcome. But they might find it a disappointing trip as most of today's action -- emptying the house for demolition -- will take place behind closed doors.

Tomorrow, however, the modest, two-story Craftsman-style house will be noisily torn down under the careful watch of Montgomery & Rust, the local developer responsible for building the family's new home.

Demolition is expected to begin at about 7 a.m. and wrap up just after lunch. Then, workers will excavate the basement and pour trench footers. Framing the house begins Monday, said senior producer Diane Korman.

With so many construction workers, volunteers and members of the media on site, parking will be at a premium. So spectators may want to park at the Abundant Beginnings parking lot at 235 Eastgate Drive and take a free shuttle that runs to and from the building site from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day.

Know, too, that you probably won't get to pose for pictures with the heartthrob Mr. Pennington, who will be splitting his time between this and another Extreme Makeover project (they film two episodes concurrently), nor chat up designers Paul DiMeo, Paige Hemmis, Eduardo Zol and Johnny Littlefield. They're simply too busy. Besides, the crowds will be cordoned off across the street behind a series of barriers.

For more information or to volunteer or donate to the build, go to www.extreme.montgomeryrust.com.

Gretchen McKay can be reached at gmckay@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1419.

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