

Baltimore Catholic lawyer takes hands-on approach to volunteering

Hoping that it doesn't rain, construction attorney Lou Kozlakowski will exchange his business suit and briefcase April 26 for jeans, T-shirt, work boots and a tool box as he heads off to one of Baltimore City's lower-income neighborhoods to help a family in need.

But even if it does rain, Mr. Kozlakowski and the 14 others volunteering in Baltimore's Pen Lucy neighborhood will be ready and eager to go to work. The longtime parishioner of Immaculate Heart of Mary, Baynesville, will be at the home of 65-year-old Ethel Gaither, who is struggling to raise her three grandchildren - two teenage girls and a 13-year-old boy who is a sixth-grader at nearby St. Mary of the Assumption School in Govans. Ms. Gaither has lived in her duplex home for 14 years, takes great pride in it and keeps it spotlessly clean, but living on a modest, fixed income has prevented her from performing costly, essential repairs to the old house.

Mr. Kozlakowski and his team of volunteers, which includes two of his three daughters and five members of his Baltimore construction law practice group, Wright, Constable and Skeen LLP, will take care of all the repairs, which would otherwise cost thousands of dollars, and leave the house in a safe and much more comfortable condition.

The generous efforts of the 59-year-old lawyer and his fellow volunteers are a result of the Rebuilding Together Baltimore program, which uses skilled volunteers to support community revitalization projects, culminating in Rebuilding Day 2008 on April 26. Work is done throughout the year on some 75 houses.

While Mr. Kozlakowski, who is counsel to RTB and a member of its board of directors, and his "labor gang" will be in Pen Lucy, other volunteers will be doing similar work on projects in Waverly and Turner Station.

This year is a little different, though. The volunteers will find themselves on national television later in the year thanks to HGTV (Home and Garden TV).

Baltimore was one of five winning cities in a nationwide online contest through HGTV's "Change the World. Start at Home" community and revitalization awareness campaign, which is a collaboration between HGTV and its partners; Rebuilding Together Baltimore, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Natural Resource Defense Council.

The HGTV program will focus on the revitalization of Ms. Gaither's home.

But TV or no TV, Mr. Kozlakowski is out in the community, giving a skilled helping hand - and has been for many years now - because he cares. It is a view of life he attributes to his growing up in a close Polish Catholic family, (his father was an immigrant from Poland) and his Catholic school education, both of which made him appreciate the special, faith-based quality of "giving back," as he explained it. He has been involved in hands-on volunteer work for as long as he can remember, particularly when his children were going to school, one of whom graduated from the Institute of Notre Dame.

His willingness to give back also has to do with his desire to make an impact.

"I know I can't change the world," he said, "but I can make an impact in my little area and hope that it spreads, even if it's only person to person. But that's how positive change happens, I believe."

As his Polish Catholic parents raised him in this spirit, so have he and his wife, Shirley, raised their children. Their oldest daughter, 33-year-old Meredith Simmons (the IND grad), a schoolteacher, and 27-year-old paralegal, Laurel Jay, will be side by side with their father at Ms. Gaither's home on Rebuilding Day, while Mrs. Kozlakowski will be bringing lunch for the crew.

"It's a family affair, and that includes people from my law firm," Mr. Kozlakowski said.

His daughters are not "exactly skilled" at home repairs, he said, so he'll probably put them to work painting walls and ceilings.

"We have quite a few willing volunteers with good hearts but few actual skills," he said, "so we really need people who know carpentry or plumbing or have electrician

skills, and it's not too late for them to volunteer," he said.

What will they get out of it?

"Well, if they're like me, they'll get a lot of personal satisfaction," he said. "It's one thing to write a check, and that's a good thing, but to be there and see the reality of what you're doing to help others and how joyfully they respond, that's really something. You get immediate feedback and a warmer feeling. You see visible change and you see visible change in the lives of the people you help. That's what it's all about."