

A lesson in building a community

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I have always wondered what I would do if a large windfall came my way. I like to think I would use it for a greater good. But in the past when I received unexpected money, I always needed it to cover the basics. Admittedly "the basics" for my family are very different than for many other families, especially in countries where poverty is a way of life.

Recently I had the opportunity to learn how a successful inventor has chosen to spend his earnings. I received an e-mail from my dad, Jim Oberweis, asking my siblings and I to donate to a worthwhile cause, the Arial Home Initiative, started by his friends Tom and Jane Pirelli. When I visited the Web site, Arialhome.org, I learned that Arial Home took groups of volunteers -- including high school students and adults -- on a "build" to Ensenada, Mexico to put up houses.

Pirelli went to Ensenada with a group of successful businessmen to build a house several years ago. He realized the potential to better the materials and the process and improve the time and ease with which to construct a functional house.



Using a comment from his friend Dave Riley, Pirelli converted the concept of an insulated refrigerator door into a technique for making modular wall and roof panels. He made panels into Lego-like pieces that could be easily assembled by a group of volunteers in a short amount of time. The inside of the home was also set up with a commode and shower (plumbing into a septic hole outside the house) and a solar panel on the roof to provide basic electricity.

Using a significant amount of his own money along with donations, Pirelli built a factory in Ensenada to manufacture the panels. He partnered with an established organization, Youth With A Mission, to provide the screening process for which families would receive a home. In less than two years, Pirelli has lead "the build" for 21 Arial homes. His goal is to work with charity partners to build 250 Arial Home manufacturing plants around the world, resulting in a million homes for impoverished families on multiple continents.

My daughters and I were lucky enough to join him on his last build this June. We went with my dad, his wife, and friends Libby and Nick Scanlan of Sugar Grove. Pirelli's daughter Megan and a variety of others made up our group of about 45 people. The experience left an imprint that I will always carry with me. I hope to share even a small piece of the encounter, but cannot do justice to the actual event.

On Day 1 we traveled to San Diego then rode in a rented van about an hour over the Mexico border to our Ensenada hotel. That evening we met our fellow workers and watched a video

orientation. We divided into three teams of about 12-15 people. Jobs were assigned for the following day (panel lifters, caulkers, screwgun operators, and quartermaster).

Day 2 started with a quick tour of the factory. We drove to the homesites on land consisting of a combination of very fine dust/dirt/sand with very little vegetation. Each team had a cement slab installed by local workers about a week earlier. A steel guide channel was embedded in the concrete. We unloaded the panels from the truck, caulked, and slid them into position. After leveling the panels, the screw gun team secured the panels. We installed the roof and solar panel in the same process. We finished the basic structure in about four hours. After clean up we returned to the hotel. By dinner Pirelli had already put together a slide show of each team constructing a house.

On Day 3 we assembled furniture, cleaned, painted, decorated, cleaned, laid out gifts for the family, and cleaned a last time. Each Mexican family cooked lunch for the volunteers constructing their home. They stayed with us all day, but were not allowed into the house. At 2 p.m. during the "Key Ceremony," the family was presented with the key to their new home, which they entered for the first time. As tradition dictated we waited a couple minutes, then knocked and asked to visit them in their new home. They opened the door and emotions flowed freely from all.

Our Mexican family included a husband and wife, an 11-year-old son, a 17-year-old daughter and her 12-month-old baby. We had interacted with them throughout the day. The boy had been playing soccer with our students during their downtime, but had somewhat avoided the adults. When we entered the home to "visit" he threw himself at us in hugs that did not cease until he had been through the whole group at least twice. Libby Scanlan made the point that sending money to support beneficial projects is important, but being part of the community as the work is done changes everyone.

Driving through Ensenada I saw several unfinished cinderblock homes. Veterans of prior builds explained that some families buy a block at a time and construct their home over a period of years. The Pirellis have started an initiative to provide homes to a multitude of people. Many of us have more limited resources, but we can contribute one block at a time. Over time we can all make a difference together.

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