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SPOTLIGHT

Futuristic materials simplify Rice County Habitat's new build

By ZACH KAYSER zach.kayser@apgsomn.com
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Habitat for Humanity volunteer Dave Wolf helps construct what will become the Strand family home in Northfield on Tuesday. Wolf is using a reciprocating blade inserted, to help settle concrete as it is poured into forms. (Zach Kayser/southernminn.com)

Zach Kayser

Rice County Habitat for Humanity showed off a new home under construction with an innovative new material to dozens of people.

The site visit adjacent to St. Peter's Lutheran Church on Sumner Street drew state and local lawmakers and a contingent of Habitat construction volunteers to help pour concrete. Everyone wore hardhats, both because it was an active construction site and to protect from the periodic impacts of baseball-size fruit falling from the canopy of black walnut trees 50 feet overhead.

Rice County Habitat Executive Director Dayna Norvold successfully avoided getting hit by fruit as she spoke to the crowd about the need for affordable housing in the area. Within Rice County 27% of households earn less than \$35,000 a year, she said, but market-rate rent averages \$1,200 monthly.

"Enter: Habitat for Humanity," she said.

The organization offers affordable mortgages for the families that occupy the homes it builds, Norvold said. Housing, in turn, provides stability and helps prevent negative social effects such as truancy, she said.

The home that will eventually be occupied by the Strand family had its foundation and walls already in place. The event Tuesday featured Mendota Heights-based Cemstone pouring concrete into a new type of mold that allows for simpler construction: the insulated concrete form (ICF). These molds are made from styrofoam, not unlike the disposable coolers one might store drinks in for a camping trip.

Supplied in this case by the Canadian company Logix, the ICFs interlock with each other to form a precise mold, doubling as insulation throughout the life of the building. ICFs are ideally suited for the Habitat's volunteer builder teams since they simplify construction, making it more goof-proof.

Jenna Strand said the family was connected to Habitat through their church; St. Peter's. Strand works at the Benedictine Living Community-Northfield, so this new home represents the community giving back to her and her family. She said their young son Lucas would benefit from learning how to walk in the expanded space of the new home.

"The kids are very excited," she said. "They'll have a big backyard to play [in]."

The Strands hope to move in early next year.

Reach reporter Zach Kayser at 507-645-1115. ©Copyright 2021 APG Media of Southern Minnesota. All rights reserved.

Zach Kayser