Volunteers apply elbow grease to local homes

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Author: Kathryn Balint

The little home on Lea Street was once the scourge of the neighborhood.

It was a rundown drug house, a blight on the block, neighbors say, until Ignacio Flores and his family bought it two years ago.

Flores made the $85,500, boarded-up house a source of pride and joy for himself, his wife and three children.

After working all day as a landscaper, he would come home to Chollas Creek and sometimes work until midnight, building a brick retaining wall in the front yard, constructing an archway entry into his kitchen and remodeling the bathroom.

He replastered and repainted the inside walls. And, because the house didn't even come with a stove, a water heater or flooring, he installed those, too -- by himself.

So, after toiling single-handedly for so long, Flores said it was like a dream come true yesterday when two dozen volunteers provided a helping hand, giving his one-story house a fresh coat of paint.

The home was one of 19 houses in the Chollas Creek area of City Heights that were spruced up yesterday as part of the San Diego Neighborhood Housing Services' biannual "Facelift" event.

Among the approximately 500 volunteers was former San Diego City Manager Jack McGrory, now the chief executive officer of Price Enterprises. He painted green trim on the eaves of Flores' house.

To the helpers, Flores couldn't say "thank you" enough.

"What we did today would have taken one person a month to do," said Lance Almac, 16.

Lance, a junior at Point Loma High School, pitched in with other volunteers from the Aaron Price Fellows Program. The program, which promotes teen leadership, was started by Price Club founder Sol Price in memory of his grandson, who died of a brain tumor at age 15.

About two dozen organizations volunteered their services and goods for the all-day neighborhood event. Besides painting houses, they planted petunias and pansies.

They provided garbage bins for everyone in the neighborhood to toss out junk. And a
"graffiti patrol" wiped out the unsightly work of vandals. Then everyone -- volunteers and residents alike -- feasted at a curbside barbecue.

The nonprofit Neighborhood Housing Services helps low- and moderate-income people buy and maintain homes.

Diane Buckley, the organization's marketing coordinator, said the idea is to beautify inner-city neighborhoods by promoting home ownership.

"If there are a lot of renters in an area, typically they don't care about keeping it up," she said.

Neighborhood Housing Services focuses its efforts on City Heights, an area generally south of El Cajon Boulevard and split by 40th Street.

"That's the neighborhood in San Diego that is in the most decline," Buckley said.

City Heights is trying to turn itself around. With events such as yesterday's, its trash-filled, vacant lots once used by drug dealers and its deteriorating old buildings are, little by little, being cleaned up.

"This is a great event for essentially overnight transforming a neighborhood from one of dilapidation and neglect to one of progress and hope," said Dean Rohrbach, executive director of Neighborhood Housing Services.