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Miracle in Scott County

Woman rescued with new dwelling

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Esther Davis' wooden walking stick has the face of a man intricately carved near the top.

"His eyes are so real looking ... I feel like he can see just about everything going on around here," Davis said with a grin.

If so, the man on the stick has seen plenty in recent weeks. Davis, an 87-year-old resident of rural Scott County, lives alone in a house that is barely standing, where possums have been known to snatch food from her kitchen table. Her story was chronicled in the Aug. 16 editions of The Clarion-Ledger and also on a Jackson TV station.

Since then, members of nearby Mount Olivet Baptist Church have raised approximately \$56,000. About half of the money has gone into building a 900-square-foot home - with two bedrooms and one bath - that stands 90 percent completed just to the west of the wrinkled shack. James Crain, a nearby resident, said it should be finished near the end of October, before cold weather sets in.

"Our original goal was to raise \$27,000 and maybe try and get her into something like a FEMA house," said Crain, who started the fundraising efforts at Mount Olivet after spotting Davis in the yard of what he had thought for years was an abandoned shack. "But after people saw and read the story, the money has poured in."

From Rhode Island, Hawaii and Maryland. From countless Mississippians. From a convict - name and facility unknown - who contributed \$500.

"And a lot of people have donated work that would've made the costs run way up," added Crain, a retired oil field worker. "That's why we've only spent about \$22,000 so far. We still have to have the cabinets and counter tops done. The Sheetrock has to be installed and the floors covered. But now we're going to be able to furnish the house.

"Any money left over will be kept in a fund that will go toward Miss Esther's living expenses. If she were to pass away before the money has all been spent, she's asked that it go to (Mount Olivet)."

Robinson Electric Supply Co. in Forest wired the house for free. **McGee Construction of Lake contributed the dirt work.** Two men - Crain could only recall that one of them was nicknamed "Little Man" - showed up and painted the house's exterior. And on Tuesday, Energy Insulation of Gluckstadt pumped about \$1,800 worth of its product into the walls and attic at charge.

"We used to do this more often ... before times got so tough," said Rixon Simmons, owner of Energy Insulation. "But Mrs. Davis' story just jumped off the page. (Wife) Demi and I talked about it, and we just felt like the good Lord wanted us to step up and do something."

Davis said it's still hard to fathom the new house resting there, shining in the early afternoon sunshine, where piles of rusty tin, rotten wood and thick brush used to be.

"It's a miracle from God," she said, sitting in the shade of her yard and gently jabbing her walking stick in dirt softened by a morning shower. "It is exactly what I thought it would look like when I prayed for it. I knew God would do this for me. I just didn't know when.

"I absolutely love it. It's part of my heart. And if you had lived the way I have, you would say the same thing."

Most of her immediate family are deceased. She never had children. Her only surviving sibling, Mildred Surry, lives nearby but has health issues.

Davis has lived all of her life within 30 miles of her present home. She has refused to move from this plot where she and her husband used to farm cotton, even at the urging of a nephew who lives less than a mile away. "Where else was I going to go?" she said. "This is home. If I was going to get a new one, it had to be here."

Her monthly Social Security check is slightly less than \$700. She drives 15 miles to the grocery store in Forest once a month. Her other bills - water, electricity, phone - run approximately \$200 a month.

Davis said she has received more than a new house.

"These people," she said, pointing to Crain and his wife, Hilda, "are like my children, my family. They watch after me better than most children do their real parents. It's not a day goes by that they're not calling or coming by. It means the world to me."

Hilda Crain knows a thing or two about miracles. She had a liver transplant in May 2008. Ten days later, she was shopping at Wal-Mart in Forest. She has had no complications from the surgery.

"We need to hurry up and get this done so we can both get some sleep," Hilda Crain said, smiling at Davis. "I woke up the other night and thought, 'We haven't talked to anyone about putting her a doorbell on the house. She needs that.' Just things like that have sort of consumed James and me the past few weeks."

Even though she has lived in the rundown house for four decades, Davis said she has no emotional attachment to it.

"I just want to get a few things out of it, like my old sewing machine, and they can do whatever they want to with it," she said.

James Crain said the house probably will be bulldozed.

Inside the new one, Davis will enjoy things many people take for granted, things she has never had: central air and heat, washer and dryer and a side-by-side refrigerator/freezer, complete with an ice maker.

"They're gonna make me lazy if they don't watch out," Davis said, giggling.

She already has a site for a small garden picked out, on the west side of her home. And when the dirt work was done, it was finished off with a solid layer of topsoil.

Davis said the new house tells a story much bigger than its 900 square feet.

"When I was a young girl, they used to say I was either going to be a devil or a saint," she said. "I'd drink that bootleg whiskey and go to the juke joints and dance. People would come just to see me dance.

"But my sister started doing some heavy praying, and I watched her fast for three days. I did it with her. After those three days were up, I went to get me a cigarette, but I said, 'If I can do without it for three days, I can do without it forever.' That was sort of the start of my (spiritual) walk.

"God said if you will be faithful over a few things, he will make you ruler over many."

She stared toward the new home, where the insulation workers were almost finished.

"That house," she said, "can be a lesson for us all."
