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## **Rebuilding, One House At A Time**



**"What they did for the house, what they did for my heart.... They made it feel like home again," says Waveland resident, Geri Bleau, whose house was rebuilt with the help of a Hatboro firm.**

**Geri Bleau has faced illness, a hurricane and more. She has emerged on the other side with her head held high.**

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THE INTELLIGENCER

**WAVELAND, Miss.** -- "Look at my cabinets!" says Geri Bleau, twirling around like a school girl. The 52-year-old Waveland woman is downright giddy.

Bleau stands in her new kitchen. The windows are in and the floor is installed. There's no refrigerator yet, no furniture, no working bathroom, and, most noticeably, no air conditioning.

But there soon will be and Bleau and her family will move out of the trailers in their front yard and into a new home, thanks to CityTeam Ministries and volunteers from all over the country, including a group from Hatboro.



***Tilghman Builders Inc.***  
*workers (from left) —*  
*Bob Schoen, Mike Fallon, Jr,*  
*Mike Fallon, and Mike DeLuca*  
*helped rebuild homes after*  
*Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.*

*Geri Bleau keeps a book for all*  
*the volunteers to sign who have*  
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*Hatboro company that does*  
*home additions and renovations.*

CityTeam is a national nonprofit organization that helps the poor and homeless, providing food, shelter, recovery programs and more. The group has set up tents on a softball field in Bay St. Louis and has been identifying a handful of residents in the Bay-Waveland area who are not getting Federal Emergency Management Agency money and need help rebuilding their homes. Many are emergency workers who had to stay during the storm.

Bleau and her family fit the bill. Her 25-year-old son, Jody Richardson, is a deputy with the Hancock County Sheriff's Department and will soon become a Waveland police officer. He and his wife, Beth, live with Bleau, her husband, Gil, and her daughter Lizzie.

"It's the most profound thing that ever happened to us. I don't know what we would have done," said Geri, who begins to cry as she thinks about her life without CityTeam's help.

Bleau keeps a book for all the volunteers to sign who have worked on her home. The last entries include members of Tilghman Builders Inc., a Hatboro company that does home additions and renovations.

Earlier this month, 10 employees – nearly the entire company – and four of their family members traveled to the Bay-Waveland area.

Bleau's house was one of three they worked on. The team, which included Mike Fallon, production manager for Tilghman, put in the ceramic tile, installed windows, built a full kitchen, painted all the trim and hung the doors. And they did it in just four days, in exhausting heat and oppressive humidity.

"It was the most rewarding experience I ever had," said Fallon, who said the company wants to go back next year and do more. "(Geri) touched each and every person who worked in her house. Her spirit and how she's handling the whole situation, it took the heat and exhaustion all away and made it easy."

Fallon says the "crowning moment" came when they handed Bleau the new keys to her front door. "What they did for the house, what they did for my heart.... They made it feel like home again," said Bleau. "I was going to sneak in the back of their truck to Pennsylvania. But they made my house so beautiful I'm not going to leave."

### **A battle before and after the storm**

Geri Bleau is a self-determined woman, a doer, she says, accustomed to handling life's many obstacles. And she's had some doozies, even before the hurricane pummeled her life.

Bleau cares for her husband Gil, 55, who has spent 1,000 days in the hospital over the last few years, and her 21-year-old autistic daughter Lizzie. Gil has congestive heart failure. A big man, Gil is confined to a wheelchair and has limited mobility. Bleau has tried to work, but it's difficult with trying to care for her husband and daughter. The family lives on \$700 a month from Social Security. There was no insurance on the house. The family just couldn't afford it.

"I was worn out and exhausted on Aug. 28," said Bleau. But on Aug. 29, things came crashing in on her. The Bleaus fled before the storm and returned to find their house unlivable. They were able to salvage a plaque on the outside of the house that reads: "Having a place to go is home. Having someone to love is family. Having both is a blessing."

The plaque has been with the family wherever they go, whether it was those first few days living in a tent in the Wal-Mart parking lot, later in a camper, and then in a FEMA trailer.

Just before the storm, Gil was airlifted to a hospital in Mobile, Ala. Gil says he was helpless. All he could do was watch the storm on the news. "It was crazy for me. I was sitting in Mobile knowing they're there and all I know is what CNN is saying."

One broadcast showed a reporter standing at the intersection of Central and Nicholson avenues near his Waveland home. There was almost nothing left. "I started shaking," said Gil, tearing up as he remembers that day. The nurses at the hospital came rushing in to check on him. "I said, "That's my home."

It took Geri two weeks to find him. A friend living in Chadds Ford, Delaware County, was able to track him down and let Geri know where he was. The Alabama State Police drove the family to Mobile.

Today the Bleaus are back in Waveland, waiting for the day their home is ready. Jody and Beth live in one trailer. Geri, Lizzie and Gil live in another. It's a handicapped-accessible trailer, which only means there's a ramp to help Gil get in. But he has trouble maneuvering around and even more difficulty sleeping.

### **The recovery**

Lizzie is having the most difficult time of all. "Everything she owned was destroyed," said her mom, through tears mixing with beads of sweat. "(Lizzie) has really regressed badly."

Lizzie, who had been making significant progress before the storm, now has loud outbursts and fits. She pulls at her blond hair and bites on her hand, causing bruises. The only things that seem to calm her is music, a picture of her new bedspread that will be covered with pumpkins (born in October, she loves Halloween), and the picture of the dress she will wear in October when Jody and Beth finally have a wedding reception.

They were married by a justice of the peace in Alabama shortly after the storm and ate their first meal as husband and wife at a Sonic fast-food restaurant. "They had a drive-in honeymoon," said Bleau. They spent their wedding night in a hospital suite near Gil, with Geri and Lizzie.

People began hearing Bleau's story and wanted to help. A woman from the Philadelphia area is paying for Jody and Beth's wedding. A family in Wisconsin is paying for Lizzie's bedroom furniture. The nearby American Legion bought Lizzie a shiny new bicycle.

"Her tears came pouring out" when she saw the bike, said Bleau, a poignant moment for the family since Lizzie has trouble expressing her feelings. Geri's son, Jody Richardson, doesn't talk much about the things he experienced as a deputy sheriff, his mom said.

Richardson had to bag bodies of people he knew, including family friends he found who had drowned in the attic of their home. Jody found the father with his arms still clasped around his two teenaged autistic children.

"It was someone (Jody) knew and they were helpless and like his sister," said Geri. "(Jody) is not the same. He spends a lot of time reading and on his computer. He doesn't like down time." Jody will soon become a police officer with the Waveland department. His mood and behavior reminds Gil of what it was like for him and the other American soldiers when they returned from Vietnam.

## **The future**

Geri doesn't sleep much these days -- 40 minutes in one sitting is the longest she can muster. So at night she grabs a flashlight and walks around her new home. Although it's not complete, she sits on the floor imagining what it will be like for her and her family.

In one room, Jody will live with Beth. Next door is set aside for Lizzie. And a small room will be for Gil, his hospital bed will undoubtedly take up the bulk of the space. As for Geri, she will have to sleep on a couch in the living room.

"I'm not extraordinary," she asserts. "I'm not a saint. I'm hanging on by my fingernails. You don't have a choice. It's like you're watching a movie or having a dream but you don't get up."

Despite all the trials and tribulations, or maybe because of it, Bleau wants to give back. She talks about volunteering with CityTeam Ministries. "I'd like to be on the giving end again. It's a lot more fun."

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