

By DOUG LOGAN
Special Contributor

The crowd came early one Saturday morning with video cameras.

"We thought it was going to be a testimonial," Ronnie Ray said. "They were filming and yelling."

Instead, Mr. Ray, his wife, Stacey, and their three children - Kristina, 16, Ruben, 5, and Celeste, 4 - got the surprise of their lives when Operation Compassion announced a home makeover for them. The nonprofit is run through Grace Church International in Carrollton.

"We didn't believe it was for us," Ms. Ray said. "They kept telling us this was real."

Their 1,100-square-foot home on Willow Street in Grand Prairie was badly in need of repairs. The roof leaked, the air conditioner didn't work, and the furnishings were sparse.

Every Saturday since Aug. 27, church members and other volunteers have reported to the Ray home for duty. The last of the work should be done Oct. 8 with the arrival of new furniture and landscaping materials.

"This is a blessing to us," Mr. Ray said.

The family's move to Grand Prairie in 2002 was about more than owning a home. They escaped from a life of crime, drugs and gangs in Dallas. Kristina bears the scars from being struck three times in a drive-by shooting when she was 4. One of the bullets is still lodged in her leg.

After moving to Grand Prairie, the Rays joined Grace Church International when it was in Irving. The church has since moved to Carrollton.

"We just felt they really deserve this," Andrea Boyd, one of the coordinators for Operation Compassion, said of the renovation for the Rays.

"They take care of what is given to them."

Businesses from Dallas, DeSoto and Grand Prairie are donating time and materials to the project.

"Grand Prairie Home Builders Association replaced the whole roof," Ms. Boyd said. "They did more than we were asking for."

The Home Builders Association also fixed the air conditioner and is planning on replacing some kitchen appliances.

"I feel so humbled that I have to continue to make my life better for God," Ms. Ray said.

Operation Compassion is an outreach program that has provided holiday dinners at Thanksgiving and Christmas for families in need as well as back-to-school supplies for children.

The Rays' home renovation is the first of what the group hopes will become an annual project.

"We couldn't have found a better family to help," volunteer Candy McCoy said. "We like helping our own members of our church family."

Doug Logan is a Justin-based freelance writer.

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The team meeting on Saturday started with a review of tasks for the day. "The baseboards need to be painted, the vanity will go in, and let's get the texturing done," said Brett Boyd, youth pastor at Grace Church International in Carrollton.

Then the team said a group prayer aloud.

The workers are volunteers with Operation Compassion, which is run through the church. The tasks are part of a major home renovation for the Ray family in Grand Prairie.

"We chose a member of our church because they have given so much already to other people," said Andrea Boyd, Mr. Boyd's wife and one of the coordinators in Operation Compassion.

Ronnie and Stacey Ray and their three children - Kristina, 16, Ruben, 5, and Celeste, 4 - have been living in the 1,100-square-foot home on Willow Street since 2002, but it was badly in need of repairs. The roof leaked, the air conditioner didn't work, and the furnishings were sparse.

But the Rays weren't complaining. Their move to Grand Prairie was about more than owning a home. They escaped from a life of crime, drugs and gangs in Dallas. Kristina bears the scars from being struck three times during a drive-by shooting when she was 4. One of the bullets is still lodged in her leg.

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Suzanne Tuttle, owner of Classic Creations in DeSoto, is one of the design team members helping to add color, texture and furniture as part of the renovation.

"We are putting in real nice stuff," Ms. Tuttle said.

She said she was anxious to help the family. Her business allows her to work on multi-million dollar homes.

"You don't know what God is going to open up," Ms. Tuttle said of her work with the Rays. "I just know it happens."

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