

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

In on the plot, and now on TV

Stephen and Sara Gill help build on Extreme Makeover

Sunday, March 2, 2008

By HOLLY KOZELSKY - Bulletin Accent Editor

This evening, the Gills will be watching themselves on TV.

If Stephen and Sara Gill can catch a glimpse of themselves, that is, among the dozens of volunteers working to create a home on ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

The show's premise is to renovate a home for a deserving family, combining the efforts of volunteers and professionals. Tonight's show features a home for the family of a Virginia Army National Guard soldier who is on active duty in Iraq.

When Sgt. Stephen Gill, 46, of Oak Level got the e-mail looking for volunteers, he jumped at the chance. Gill, the Master Sergeant of Recruiting for the National Guard in Martinsville, was ready to help a fellow soldier on duty.

"It was a pretty unique experience," he said. Because the program unveils the house, which is a surprise to the family, "It's pretty secretive. We had to park a half a mile away."

The Gills were among about 50 National Guardsmen and their families who volunteered Saturday, Dec. 8.

Everyone at the building site had to check in, and each was issued a hard hat. The color indicated the work the person was to do and the level of access the person had to the house. The Gills' hard hats were white, for landscaping. "Sara just loved running around in her hard hat," Gill chuckled.

The entire house was completed, and the lot was landscaped, in just one week.

"It was amazing to see the house go up," he recalled. The efforts among the many different types of workers were well coordinated. As each group finished its task, the next group would begin right away.

"Imagine having eight football teams on the field at one time," he said. "The coordination and effort that go into this is just unbelievable."



Master Sgt. Stephen Gill and his wife Sara Gill helped with landscaping for a house on the television program "Extreme makeover: Home Edition," which will be aired tonight on ABC.

There were “so many volunteers that some were waiting in holding groups for hours,” he said. Waiting around wasn’t so bad, though. The show’s producers made sure everyone was comfortable. There were large tents with refreshments, and massages were given. A section for spectators was roped off, and people would come and watch the volunteers work. The producers really kept the audience roused and excited, he said.

“You’re laying sod, working in the dirt, you got people behind you, (cheering) ‘Lay that sod! Lay that sod!’”

In one side yard, large white tents hid secret projects. The projects were special features of the house that were brought into the house when they were finished. They would be part of the surprise at the house’s unveiling.

Gill had a break in his work when he was able to visit with the show’s main designer, Paul DiMeo. “He was overly grateful for everything the National Guard does,” Gill recalled. The house is built in a style common during the 1860s, he said, even including some original materials. He flipped through pictures that he was unable to share until the show runs. He can’t give away the surprise.

The Gills left after dark, making the 3 1/2 hour drive back to Martinsville. The unveiling of the house was Monday, Dec. 10, and will be shown on television tonight. Gill estimated that about 150 National Guard soldiers from across the state attended the unveiling, but on that day he and Sara were back at work as usual.

Sara is an oncology nurse at Memorial Hospital. Their son, Jeremy, 22, studies at his father’s alma mater, Radford University. Their daughter, Alexandra, 14, is a student at Franklin County High School.

Gill enjoyed the experience so much that he’s ready ready for more. Now his thoughts have turned to joining in locally to help build a Habitat for Humanity house. In fact, he sees that as a potential project for the local National Guard to do together some weekend.