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## Habitat for Humanity transforms Liberty City project

BY HELEN BERGGREN

Hemmed in by white picket fences, 52 jelly-bean-colored houses dot lush, green lawns -- land where Miami-Dade's largest public housing project once stood.

"There was no grass back then," said Josette Salomon, 26, a resident of the former James E. Scott housing project. "It was just dirt everywhere."

Salomon lived in the Scott project twice -- the first time as a little girl with her mom, Souna Sanon, and five siblings.

"It was so bad," Salomon said in a phone interview Monday.

"I saw a car pass by my house with some guys wearing masks and carrying guns. My mom didn't want us to go outside and play. It was too dangerous."

Sanon managed to move her family out but had to move back into Scott when money became scarce.

"Nothing had changed," Salomon recalled. "There was no air-conditioning, walls were dirty. Everything was so old and broken."

That has all changed, thanks to Habitat for Humanity, which made it possible for Sanon and her children to move into a new home.

The family lived in Scott for nearly six years before the Miami-Dade Housing Agency tore down the buildings to make room for the multibillion-dollar federal program Hope VI: Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere.

That promise of change was never fulfilled by the Miami-Dade Housing Agency.

"The worst happened when we left Scott," Salomon said.

"We had to move to Carol City. That was a good house but, two years later, the owners sold the place."

Sanon and her family began changing addresses on a regular basis.

"There were always bug problems," Salomon said. "Lots of rats. Every once in a while you'd see one. They made lots of noise scratching in the middle of night."

Salomon remembered sewage problems at one apartment.

"Everything in the bathroom was always clogging up. The toilet, the sink. I had to go to a friend's house to take a shower. We had one bathroom for seven people," she said.

A telephone call from Habitat for Humanity marked the turning point for Sanon and her family.

"We sent the application in," Salomon said. "But my brothers and I didn't think it would ever happen."

But it did.

'In May, reality hit when mom started to do her sweat hours. I said, 'This is for real. Oh my God, this is for real.' "

In September 2006, the ecumenical Christian nonprofit began constructing 52 houses on the former public housing site.

With the help of nearly 9,000 volunteers and donations from the public, Habitat for Humanity completed its project on time.

On Saturday, hundreds turned out to celebrate the completion and a Blitz Build that yielded 10 houses in two weeks. Habitat for Humanity honored 41 house sponsors by naming the homes after the companies.

One of the companies honored was the law firm Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod.

"The conversion of the Habitat ideal into reality," said James W. Shindell, a partner at the firm that sponsored the Sanon home. "Where you see that such simple things can make such a huge difference in someone's life, actually a lot of lives. Not just this woman who got this house but her six children also benefited."

One sibling recognized the immediate difference good, affordable housing can make.

"I stay at home so I can focus on school and the future and not waste big money on rent," said George Salomon, 25, who is studying chemistry at Miami Dade College. "The future looks brighter for all of us."

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