



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND

Chelsea Churchill, a University of Arkansas at Little Rock swim team member, hammers nails on a wall panel for a Habitat for Humanity home under construction Friday outside Alltel Arena in North Little Rock.

UALR athletes pitch in for Habitat

Students help to build home on temporary site near Alltel Arena

BY MICHELLE HILLEN
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

As a swimmer for the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, junior Chelsea Churchill is more at home in the pool than on a construction site.

But Friday, Churchill and nearly 70 other UALR student athletes swung hammers, measured door frames and braced walls as part of a Habitat for Humanity project going on in

conjunction with the NCAA Tournament.

“To imagine we are actually going to build a house is really cool,” Churchill said during a break from nailing plywood onto wall frames at a temporary building site across from Alltel Arena. “I’m having a blast.”

The project, a partnership between the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Habitat for Humanity and Lowe’s, began as

a way for the NCAA to help victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita along the Gulf Coast, said Dana Thomas, spokesman for the association.

Now in its third year, the program has been expanded to include other parts of the country, Thomas said.

“This gives us a unique opportunity to reach out to those student athletes and explain

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Habitat

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how important it is to do community service and be involved," she said.

UALR is the host institution for the first- and second-round games of the 2008 NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Championship at Alltel Arena.

Students athletes from men's basketball, women's volleyball, women's swimming, women's soccer, men's and women's cross country and track teams volunteered, UALR assistant athletic director Richard Turner said.

"Our students just embraced this," he said.

The NCAA provided \$65,000 to cover the entire cost of the 1,300-square-foot home. Lowe's also contributed \$10,000 to Habitat for Humanity of Pulaski County for future projects.

The students were divided into three groups of roughly 20 students. Each group was set to work two-hour shifts throughout the day from noon until 6 p.m.

Turner said he expected the students to help build exterior and interior walls.

labor under the supervision of the Habitat for Humanity and Lowe's people," he said. "It's really a neat process."

James Scott, a junior on the men's basketball team, said it was fun to interact with his teammates, as well as fans heading to see the tournament games.

"It's a whole new experience," Scott said of the construction work. "I haven't hammered my finger yet, so I'm fine."

Once the frame is complete, the walls will remain on display at Alltel until Monday. After that, the walls will be broken down and transported to the home's permanent location on 34th Street in North Little Rock, said Megan Cole, director of development for Habitat for Humanity of Pulaski County.

"We will go pick it up and move it," Cole said. "It won't be completed [at Alltel], but we will get some of the framework done."

The nonprofit housing organization has done similar projects, with homes being built off-site and moved to a new location. It does add to the cost, but for this project, Cole said, the NCAA is paying for the move.

When complete, the home

will be turned over to Kenya Gilbert, a single mother of two, Cole said.

Gilbert will pay for the home through a combination of a 20- to 30-year low-interest mortgage loan and "sweat equity," which includes volunteer work for Habitat for Humanity. The house is expected to be completed in six weeks.

"This is just a real blessing for me," said the first-time homeowner, who was on hand Friday to meet with the volunteers and watch her home take shape.

Gilbert has cerebral palsy and said she is particularly glad that the home will be wheelchair accessible. Her sons, Chase, 6, and Kendrick, 4, are excited to finally have their own room, she said.

"It is kind of hard to explain in words," Gilbert said. "I am just ecstatic. I am just ready for it to be here."

When they finished with their shifts, students signed the plywood walls and wrote notes to Gilbert, whom they had met earlier that day.

"It's really awesome to be able to see who is going to be living in this house," Churchill said. "She was [very appreciative.] She seems very nice."



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UALR basketball team members John Fowler (right) and Shane Edwards (second from right) help raise a wall for a Habitat for Humanity house Friday outside Alltel Arena in North Little Rock.