

# Building homes and lives

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As one of the main carpenters on ABC's "Extreme Makeover; Home Edition," Paul DiMeo has gotten used to people knowing his name. But he's still surprised occasionally.

"It's funny - I'll be walking down the street and people will yell, 'Hey Paulie! How ya doing?'" DiMeo said during a phone interview last week. "I think, 'Where do I know that guy from?' But they feel like they know us because we are who we are on TV. We're not performing."

The "Extreme Makeover" team was in Levittown last week, building a home for a single mother whose house was condemned because of termite damage. She was trying to raise her boys while camped out in her parents' dining room, but still found time to volunteer with the Red Cross.

That's the sort of situation that the TV show specializes in. With a seemingly limitless budget and plenty of volunteer help, the design team demolishes an old home and builds a spectacular new one in only a week. Families are chosen on the basis of videotaped submissions, in which they document their circumstances and ask for help. The most deserving families get a



Paul DiMeo of 'Extreme Makeover' was born in Media.

new house and a vacation while work is going on.

The show is consistently among ABC's biggest hits, and its success has kept DiMeo and his fellow team members very busy.

"The family spent the first night in the new house last night," DiMeo said during a phone interview last Thursday. "Next we're off to New England for another build. We haven't stopped since we started the show," he said. "We go year-round. We'll have a small, 30-day hiatus around April 17, then it's back to work."

"We have two different teams throughout the country. Ty (Pennington, the

show's most energetic screen presence) runs back and forth between teams. I'll be able to do 16 out of the 25 homes this season."

DiMeo said the team travels with a crew of only about 57 people, including camera operators, sound engineers and the people who arrange the mountain of logistics - from selecting families to lining up hotels, recruiting volunteers and arranging parking spaces for the show's trucks.

The turnaround is remarkably short. If a family sends in a video and they're accept-

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ed today, the trucks will pull up in their driveway in three to four weeks. "We have no idea where we'll be going two months from now," DiMeo said.

DiMeo, who grew up in Media, learned about home renovation at the age of 5, when his family home burned down and his father rebuilt it. His parents now live in West Chester. After college, DiMeo built sets for Broadway productions and renovated New York City apartments. After moving to Los Angeles, he worked on renovating celebrity homes and businesses.

But it's "Extreme Makeover" that has made him a star – albeit a low-key sort. DiMeo and the rest of the team aren't afraid to let the families affect them deeply. Tears are shed, hugs are exchanged and faith in human nature is restored every Sunday evening in front of millions of viewers. It's one of the few shows that families consistently watch together.

One of the hallmarks of the show – aside from its promotion of charities big and small – is its emphasis on faith. It's a rare sight on prime-time TV as teams of volunteers pray for the families and the recipients thank God for their good fortune.

"Faith is a huge part of what we do," DiMeo said, "certainly in Middle America. And when we were down after Katrina in New Orleans

– and the whole gulf area – most of the people doing the work there were church workers. If you need help, you go to your church and they'll find a way.

"Usually you're not supposed to talk about religion and politics on TV, but we don't try to shy away from it on our show."

The show's goodhearted nature is contagious, and DiMeo said he hopes the work done by the teams will spark more good works among viewers.

"It's a blast to do this show, because we're touching people, making lives better," he said. "The house is just the backdrop to tell a family's story. Last night, we were saying that it's like a fever, a virus. This giving thing – people want to keep doing it. People can't give enough, and that's terrific."

In addition to helping charities, DiMeo has selected heart health as his emphasis on the show.

"One of the things that goes along with celebrity is – who do you help?" he said. "I was diagnosed several years ago with high cholesterol. We know about cholesterol, we can look it up on the back of food packages, but we often don't know what to do about it. My doctor put it to me in a way that I could understand; 'If your body's a house, your pipes are getting clogged up.'"

"I got on board with a great campaign where you can lose that 'white coat syndrome' that people have about doctors and find out what your numbers mean and how to move them down to what they're supposed to be.

People can find out more at [www.goalstandard.com](http://www.goalstandard.com)."

"Extreme Makeover" is able to do such spectacular renovations because most of the workers are volunteers, and products are featured prominently on screen in return for donations of building supplies and furniture. Part of each show is a shopping trip to Sears, for instance.

DiMeo admitted with a chuckle that all Sears stores do tend to look alike wherever they are, "but you gotta pay the bills. There's no way we would do the show without (product placements). It would cost about a million dollars a home."

DiMeo and the other main designers and carpenters do have assistants behind the scenes as they complete a project each week. DiMeo, for instance, may take on designing and building a child's bedroom around a certain theme. If he has some helpers, he can do more than one project a week, he explained, "which is a great thing."

The episode taped in Levittown will air on May 6.

With a goal of visiting all 50 states, the "Extreme Makeover" team will hit 25 this season and 25 more next season, DiMeo said.

With all that traveling, he has learned a few things.

"You get into some towns where people almost apologize for the town," he said. "There are good people and bad people, but there are many, many more good people. We feel very fortunate that we're on a TV show that's a good show."

<http://abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome/>