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Story **Most 'Extreme' yet**

'Makeover' goes out with a bang in tornado-torn Joplin

By MAXINE SHEN
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"Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" is hanging up its hammer with its biggest build ever — a seven-family neighborhood in tornado-torn Joplin, Mo.

Tomorrow night, the ABC series that's built more than 200 new homes, and changed thousands of lives for the better, ends its nine-season run by building seven houses in just seven days.

"For all of us that were there, Joplin was life-changing," says series designer Paul DiMeo while rattling off stats including the 13,000 volunteers and 21 builders that flocked to Joplin to work on the houses last November, right before Thanksgiving.

"To be doing this for nine years, to end on that note, is something that I'll always remember," he says.

The "Home Edition" crew picked Joplin for its big send-off — which also happens to be the show's 200th episode — because it's still devastated by May's deadly tornado.

In half an hour, the slow-moving twister killed about 160 people and obliterated nearly 8,000 homes. It left a "scar" on Joplin about the size of Manhattan, DiMeo says.

"It seemed like a really good fit [for the show] to be part of the healing process that was going on there in Joplin," he says of the decision to set the finale there.

To pick the seven featured families — two of which lost young children when they were literally ripped out of their moms' arms by the tornado — out of the thousands suffering similar plights,

DiMeo says that the series "tried to look to people who tell a story of hope and who wanted to be back in Joplin."

These were families that said, "This is my home, this is where I grew up, where I want my kids to go to school. This is the heartland of America, and we want to be part of that heart," he says, stressing that they definitely were not the only ones that felt that way.

SECOND CHANCE: Paul DiMeo (left) and Tracy Hutson build new homes for families in Joplin, Mo.

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While you'd expect there to be some bitter neighbors who weren't lucky enough to get a free house, "I will tell you this," DiMeo says, "Many people that worked next to me and on those seven homes were people who also lost their

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homes. They were happy to be there, doing it because they knew it was a rebuilding process."

Unlike houses previously built by "Home Edition" — which tend to be mind-bogglingly lavish — the Joplin homes are very accessible.

"Most of them sit right around the 2,000-square-foot area size and are insulated with the latest and best of what we know will keep their bills down," DiMeo says.

The houses range in style from Venice Beach and ultra modern to Bohemian. More significantly, the building plans will all be made available free to those going to Joplin and looking to rebuild homes.

"It's one less thing you have to pay for," DiMeo says. "We tried to think ahead, 'How can we help Joplin so the future is brighter for them?'"

Although "Home Edition" was canceled last month, it will return for four specials during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

Beyond that, DiMeo doesn't know what the future holds for the series.

But, he says, whether people tune in or not, "The work is getting done. Seven families have homes.

"I can't look at it any other way."

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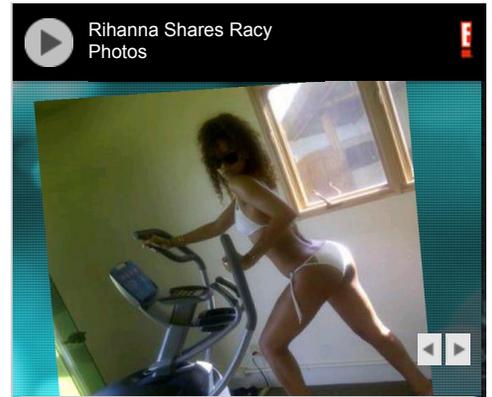


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