

REBUILDING
TOGETHER
SHAWNEE

STORY BY
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Neighbor *to neighbor*

*Rebuilding Together Shawnee offers home repair
and peace of mind*



WHEN MATT HUTCHINSON RETURNED HOME after the nonprofit group Rebuilding Together Shawnee completed renovations there, he did something unusual: “For the first time in about 10 years, I saw my house and smiled,” he says.

Hutchinson and his wife, Kristin, have lived in Shawnee since 1993. Kristin is homebound and usually bedridden due to severe arthritis and other complications. Matt cares for her daily in addition to working full time, which doesn’t leave a lot of time for home maintenance.

“Taking care of me takes a lot of work,” Kristin says. “We have a friend that comes over and helps while he’s at work, but he still just doesn’t have much time to get the little things done.”

Jeff Bahnson, left, and David Morris have developed a friendship after working on Kristin and Matt Hutchinson’s home in Shawnee. The residence was remodeled in April as part of Rebuilding Together Shawnee, co-founded by Morris and Bahnson.



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Unknown to the couple, someone spotted the wooden wheelchair ramp in front of their home and contacted Rebuilding Together Shawnee. Of course Kristin has no idea whom it was, but laughs as she says she owes them a lot. Kristin then received a phone call inquiring if they would be interested in receiving some help with basic home repairs from Rebuilding Together Shawnee—“from one neighbor to another.”

Rebuilding Together Shawnee was co-founded more than a year ago by longtime Shawnee residents David Morris, owner of David Morris Photography, and Jeff Bahnsen, vice president of investments at UBS Financial.

“David and I talked about helping Shawnee residents that couldn’t get through the winter because it was too cold, or had home repair they needed done but couldn’t afford,” Bahnsen says. “Instead of reinventing the wheel, we became an affiliate of the national Rebuilding Together organization.”

Bahnsen and Morris spent a year getting the organization up and running, completing paperwork and bylaws, and putting together an advisory board. By watching more than 100 volunteers show up for the group’s first projects on April 26, they were rewarded. The Hutchinsons’ home was just one of five where work was completed that weekend.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The home was nominated for assistance by an anonymous neighbor, whom Kristin would like to thank. The back door was nearly falling in before renovations. The original asbestos siding was stripped and replaced with vinyl siding. Signs for remodelers, painters and product providers were placed in front of the home; these entities volunteered their time and products for the Hutchinsons’ home. A new door better insulates the home. The home’s deteriorating structure was repaired.

Morris thinks the organization's local aspect is its strength. "Johnson County is considered a well-to-do county, so there's not a whole lot of concentration on the poor, elderly or military families," he says. "But there are segments within Johnson County that are definitely hurting. If we can lift those segments up, it helps the whole community by improving their neighborhoods."

Rebuilding Together Shawnee has projects at two more houses planned for October. As a national organization, Rebuilding Together is comprised of more than 225 affiliates in 46 states. It works to preserve both homeownership and neighborhoods by providing free rehabilitation services to those in need.

For the Hutchinsons, "rehabilitation services" meant everything from a new concrete wheelchair ramp to freshly planted, low-maintenance flowers. Kristin says a crew of around 20 people redid the driveway, replaced asbestos-based siding with new vinyl siding, fixed gutters, replaced trees in precarious positions, took out shrubbery and replaced some electrical wiring.

They also replaced windows and screens with double-pane, energy-efficient windows, which help Kristin and Matt in two ways. One is the savings on heating and cooling costs. In addition, Kristin is now able to get some much-needed fresh air. "The screens were in bad shape before, and the windows were difficult to open," she says. "For a lot of people that wouldn't be a big deal, but for me, because I can't get out much, it is."

Doing renovations with energy savings in mind is part of the group's goal.

"We try to focus on energy conservation and green aspects to our remodeling," says Morris. "If we can make sure a hot water furnace we install is as efficient as possible that will help, not only now, but down the road also."

Michelle Lewis, a staff associate at Bayer HealthCare who serves as volunteer chairwoman for Rebuilding Together Shawnee, says volunteers of all walks of life and professions helped with the group's first projects. Roofers, siders, carpenters and electricians have volunteered, as well as individuals who are not skilled in a trade but contribute by painting or doing yard work.

Lewis' involvement stems from personal experience. "I was in a position once in my own life where I could have used help of that nature," Lewis says. "I was dead broke and had a crappy job, and needed some things done that I couldn't do being a single mom." Lewis did receive help from friends, and for her, Rebuilding Together Shawnee is her way to "pay it forward."

Thanks to the efforts of Lewis and others like her, the Hutchinsons can focus on issues besides their home's maintenance.

"I feel like we're a better part of the neighborhood," Kristin says. "When it rains we don't have to worry about the gutters falling off, and now Matt can focus on taking care of me." The nursery employee who planted the flowers has even come by a few times after the renovations to weed her garden.

"I think people like to help their neighbors," Bahnsen says. "It's a Midwest thing. We've seen groups and organizations leave the neighborhood to go work in hurricane-ravaged areas or inner city areas." However, Rebuilding Together Shawnee is the answer to what Bahnsen says was a need for a locally structured organization.

And the Hutchinsons couldn't be happier.

"For several years, I had been wondering how I was ever going to afford to have it all fixed," Matt says. "It's alleviated that stress, so that I can focus more on getting my wife feeling better and more healthy." **SM**

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Dr. Robert W. Thompson Jr. is a board certified and fellowship trained ophthalmologist specializing in LASIK refractive surgery, and cataract and external diseases of the eye. He received his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, a medical internship at Harvard's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and an ophthalmology residency at Johns Hopkins Wilmer Eye Institute.



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