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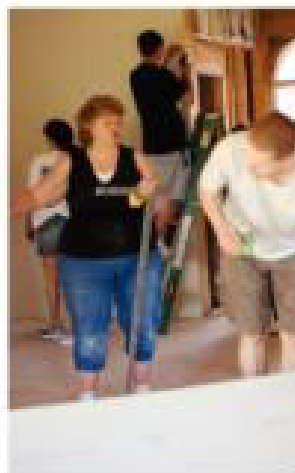
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BONITA'S WISH

story by **Ellis Anderson**
photos by **Cathy Waugh**



ABOVE: BONITA KEELY, shown with her family, was a breath of sunshine to everyone who knew her. From Left to Right are Brittany, Garth, Kameron, and Bonita.

The first time Jeff Parness met Bonita Keely, she wore a bright bandana on her head to cover the effects of chemotherapy treatments. Smiling, the 39-year-old mother of two welcomed him into the cramped FEMA trailer she shared with her daughters. Parness knew Keely had terminal cancer and was dealing with the ruin of her home by Katrina, so he was astonished by her cheerful attitude.

"I'm probably not going to make it to my next birthday," she said matter-of-factly. "Would you like a beignet?" Jeff Parness is the founder of the Bonita's Wish Foundation, an

organization formed in honor of Keely. The foundation's mission is to rebuild houses for cancer patients who have lost homes in disasters. In March of this year the foundation undertook its first project. Volunteers converged from around the country to work on a home in Diamondhead. The group spent a long weekend hanging sheetrock for another survivor of both Katrina and cancer, Shirley Paulus.

Jeff Parness lives in New York City. After the terrorist attack on September 11, 2000, he formed a non-profit organization with the intent of paying forward some of the kindness extended to his city after the disaster. In the aftermath of Katrina, he

organized a team to bring assistance to the Gulf Coast. One of his New York neighbors asked Parness to consider helping her friend, Bonita Keely, who lived in Mississippi.

"She told me that Bonita had eight and a half feet of water in her house," Parness said. "Bonita's husband had been transferred and was having to work out of state, so she was taking care of their two daughters, alone. On top of all that, Bonita was battling terminal cancer."

When Parness met Bonita, he was impressed with her determination to remain alive until her family was back in their home. She was aware that time was running out. Three years before when she had first been diagnosed with cancer, doctors had given her a year to live. Despite this knowledge, Bonita had turned away previous offers of assistance because she

TOP MIDDLE: JEFF PARNES, founder of Bonita's Wish Foundation, playfully poses with two pink Bonita's Wish hammers. **VOLUNTEERS ORGANIZE** to help rebuild the homes of cancer survivors.



thought "other people had it worse." Parness was finally able to persuade her to accept the help of his group.

In March of last year, 20 volunteers showed up at the Keely's house, ready to work. Several of them were NYC firefighters, while others were past recipients of help from Parness's group. These members had come from around the country to pay it forward. Bonita's bright determination and optimism inspired them all. Later, Parness coordinated efforts with other organizations and work continued on the Keely's house throughout the summer.

With the help of these new friends, Bonita lived long enough to see her dream fulfilled. In the fall of 2006, she and her daughters moved into their newly renovated house. The first week of December, her husband was transferred back to the area and the

family was finally reunited. Eight days later, resting in the knowledge that her children were secure, she passed away while sleeping in her own home.

Over 300 people attended the funeral. All had been touched by the generosity and resolve of Bonita. During the flight back to New York after the service, Parness hatched the idea of creating a legacy for Bonita. The new organization would help others struggling with both disaster and cancer. The Bonita's Wish Foundation became a reality a few months later.

The newly formed foundation didn't waste time. They planned a return to the Gulf Coast in March of this year to assist cancer patient Shirley Paulus, who had been battling leukemia for ten years. Shirley's home in Slidell had been destroyed by Katrina. She was struggling to build a new house in Diamondhead, hampered by her fixed income.

Foundation volunteers worked with Shirley's family through a long weekend, concluding on Sunday with

a celebration of what would have been Bonita Keely's 40th birthday. Shirley, who did not know Bonita Keely, said she'd never seen people work so hard. She called the entire experience "unbelievable."

Shirley plans to volunteer the next time the group returns to the Coast. "I used to be able to hammer and pound," she said. "Right now, I'm not physically capable. But once I get moved into the house, they can stay here and I'll cook for them."

She also noted, "Even though each of the volunteers has had some sad incident in their own lives, they don't dwell on it. They've turned their grief into a desire to help other people."

And you can bet Bonita would be proud to know her legacy has just begun.

For more information on the Bonita's Wish Foundation, go to: www.bonitaswish.org.