

Senior Volunteers Provide Handyman Services to Elderly and Disabled

Long-time McKinney resident John Moore, now retired, was once an insurance adjuster who assessed hail, hurricane and other storm damage. When his father passed away in 1974, John inherited several rental properties in Dallas. Though he didn't consider himself a handyman, he and his teenage son began to hone their repair skills to meet the needs of their tenants. From this humble odd-job-man beginning, John went on to help build some of the first Habitat for Humanity homes in McKinney. "Six of us who worked on those projects really bonded," says John, so they started looking for other repair jobs they could complete to help others in need. "We did repairs for First Baptist. We helped build a house for a guy in Sherman." Soon, the unofficial group had a reputation for being willing to lend a hand.

That's when a group called the Plano Helpers contacted John and asked him if he and his friends would consider starting a repairman nonprofit benefitting senior citizens in McKinney. The Plano group had been receiving a significant number of calls from McKinney residents and didn't have the manpower to meet the need in northern Collin County. And so, McKinney Seniors Helping Seniors was born about six years ago, using seed money and training provided by Plano Helpers.

In the beginning, says John, "We started out with just five churches who made donations of \$250 each to help us get started." The group began making house calls to seniors in need of minor home repairs, changing out light bulbs, installing shower grab bars, and changing smoke alarm batteries. "Very soon, we were self-sufficient," says John. Today, donations from a variety of sources allow the group to provide minor handyman services at no charge to elderly homeowners in our community.

The group is made up of about 20 volunteers, all of whom are retired. Says John, "We have one member who is 42, and we have some in their 60's. We have two or three in their low 80's. But most of us are age 70 to 75." His eyes sparkle when he adds with a laugh: "Our goal is to keep the elderly off ladders, but I guess we're the elderly, too!" Because the group members donate their time, often use their own tools, and provide their own gas when driving to jobs, John is proud that "97% of all donations go to help others. The other 3% is just admin costs, like background checks." Adds John, "A lot of the people we help are elderly widows. The background checks reassure them because we are coming into their homes."

Further, the volunteers always visit each job site in pairs of two or more. "This buddy system protects us *and* the people we help," John says. His fellow volunteer Don Hanson (who also serves as a Stonebridge Ranch Board Director and liaison to the Amenities Committee) adds: "Sometimes our repair jobs are in rural areas north of McKinney. What if one of us gets hurt on the job? We are there to look out for each other." A secondary benefit of the buddy system is that one member can take the lead on the repair, while the other may be more useful in keeping a homeowner company. "A lot of the people we visit don't have much company and like to talk," says John. "It helps us to finish a repair more quickly if one person can chat with the homeowner while the other works." He adds with a grin, "Some of our volunteers are better at talking than fixing things."

Though the members do complete a variety of repairs, their main focus is simple: to help the elderly and disabled stay safely in their own homes as long as possible. They prioritize all health and safety tasks, such as installing grab bars in shower and toilet areas, installing threshold ramps, and installing smoke detectors ("A lot of homes in this area have 20-foot ceilings and require ladder work!" exclaims John). The service of the volunteers is as much about home maintenance as it is about supporting the

independence and dignity of the elderly and disabled. Says Don, himself retired from a long career in construction, "I've got to give back to the community somehow, and I really enjoy doing this. We feel for the people we serve, and we try to help them as best as we can." It is especially gratifying to the members when they support someone who truly can't afford a visit from a professional handyman. "Many of the people we help don't have a lot, and almost all are living on a fixed income," says John.

Naturally, because the group is made up of mature seniors, they do have some limitations in regards to what kind of projects they will tackle. They volunteer only on Wednesdays. Says Don, "We never know what we are gonna run into on a job!" They refer larger construction projects like wheelchair ramp installations to the Kiwanis Club. The non-profit is not an emergency repair service, nor a service to help in readying a home for sale. They do not install drywall, paint, do yard work or house cleaning, or run new electrical wiring. They also do not accept jobs that could take more than three hours, passing complicated plumbing and electrical issues on to skilled professionals whom they trust.

But the gratitude of those they serve truly touches their hearts. Says John, "I'm gonna brag. I'm really proud of our volunteers. Some have a lot of skills, some not so much. But all are helpers. I've heard nothing but good things about our guys." He's kept a folder of thank-you notes from people they've helped over the years. Says one hand-written letter: "Your organization performs more for 'older folk' than any I know. The volunteers are to be awarded again and again for their tremendous efforts in accomplishing so much for so many." So far, John estimates that the group has helped more than 2,000 seniors live safely at home.

If you or someone you know could benefit from the generosity of these local handymen, call 469.396.7042 for more information or visit mckinneyshs.org.