

'Ms. Fixit' comes to the aid of homeowners

BY STEPHEN WITT

When a pipe burst last year in the basement of Merril Brown's Canarsie home, she was beside herself on how to repair the damage.

Enter six women construction workers, along with a master carpenter, who were hard at work last week turning the basement back into the small apartment for Brown's U.S. Marine daughter.

The workers came through a combined effort from two non-profits that do rehabilitation work free of charge for low-income homeowners.

"The projects we do are at no cost to the struggling homeowners that we serve and our sponsors and collaborations help us to accomplish this work," said Matthew Long, spokesperson for Rebuilding Together NYC, one of the non-profits involved.

Long said the Building Together network has over 200 affiliates with headquarters in Washington, DC.

The group is similar to Habitats for Humanity, but while that organization deals with building from the ground up, Building Together focuses on rehabilitation work, he said.

Long said that in this case the work being done was financed through the Sears Holding company whose program, Heroes at Home, has raised nearly \$7 million to rehabilitate homes involving military personnel undergoing financial hardship.

Also involved in the effort was the Nontraditional Employment for Women

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(NEW), a non-profit organization that trains women for skilled jobs in construction and other blue-collar industries.

Brooklynites Celestine Payne and Evelina Graham were among the NEW members working on the house. Both said they found out about the initiative through posters on bus stops, fliers in the mail and opportunities passed along through public housing networks.

"I started a couple of years ago and I didn't get a chance to fin-

ish so I came back to finish," said Payne of Williamsburg, who has a two-year-old child and hopes to become a union carpenter.

Payne explained that the program also includes help in getting into trade unions.

Graham explained that she is looking to enter into the hazardous materials construction trade with the goal of going into business for herself.

The women are given a variety of trades to chose from including plumbing, carpentry, electrical and hazardous materials through a six-week course before applying for union membership.

The Canarsie project also had the involvement of retired carpenter Howie Rotz, who the District Council of Carpenters contacted to teach NEW members.

"This is even more fulfilling than when I worked," said Rotz, who has been mentoring NEW members for three years. "You leave a little of yourself with each girl and you find a lot of talent in New York City."

But the real joy came from Brown, who said she learned of the program through a friend.

"The leak just come down and flooded the whole place, and I couldn't really afford to take care of fixing it back up," said Brown.