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Alamo CEO builds home in East Oakland to celebrate retirement

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Valley Times

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The stretch of Edes Avenue just east of 105th Avenue in Oakland's Sobrante Park neighborhood is bleak at best.

Fresh graffiti wind along tall wooden fences, some topped with razor wire. A stone's throw away is Tyrone Carney Park, a drug-and-violence-plagued patch that the city fenced off after a fatal shooting in 2002.

It seems an unlikely place for a retiring CEO to build a home, but Roger Houghton of Alamo was doing just that Friday as part of a Habitat for Humanity project.

"I got involved 15 years ago and have been hooked ever since," Houghton said.

Despite recent knee surgery, Houghton was helping with the physical part of putting up a townhouse, as he has done many times before. The sound of hammers could be heard throughout the neighborhood as a two-story home rises next to a row of finished, colored models.

As a whole, the development is a bright spot in the neighborhood. But this one unit is special for Houghton and his wife, Judy — it's the house that Roger built.

To celebrate his retirement from mortgage

insurance company PMI Group, Houghton donated \$50,000 to Habitat. His company matched it, and that's enough to build a house, one of 84 that will eventually go up at the site. This one is for a single mother who raised her children and now is doing the same for her grandchildren.

The Houghtons have celebrated other events in a similar manner. Their 25th, 30th and 35th wedding anniversaries, for example, had them hammering and sawing at various sites around the country.

"Our 25th was at a build in South Central Los Angeles," said Judy Houghton, who retired last year from her teaching job at Valley Christian Elementary School in Dublin.

It was physically taxing, and they stayed at a Habitat-provided dorm.

"That night, we shared a little champagne, said 'Happy anniversary, I love you, good night, ... now don't touch me!'" she said.

Houghton was introduced to Habitat when Margaret Heater, a human resources officer with his company, approached him in the early 1990s.

"She said, 'You really need to be part of this,'" Houghton said.

But he was in the middle of preparing the company for an initial public offering, the sixth largest IPO ever, Houghton said. He was working from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. He told Heater to get back to him later.

She did — two weeks later. He again stalled. She came back three weeks after that.

"She told me she heard what I said, but insisted that I really needed to be involved with this," Houghton said. "And so I did it."

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That was in Eagle Butte, S.D. It immediately became apparent that what he thought would be a one-time thing was more than that.

"It completes the picture — as a CEO involved with a housing company, who believes in the importance of homeownership, this is a way to get out into the community and share that support," he said. "It really developed into a culture within the company. Now, when PMI has a build, we have to turn people down, there are so many volunteers."

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