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Moms pitch in for Habitat in Women Build Week

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Until recently, the closest Virgie Chua had ever come to operating a power tool was a kitchen blender.

On Saturday, the 53-year-old former federal government secretary learned that she liked the muscle of an electric saw and had her daughter, Victoria, 21, to thank.

At a daylong construction project operated by Habitat for Humanity during National Women Build Week and timed to coincide with Mother's Day, the duo joined two dozen other women laboring on new homes for low-income families in Oakland's Sobrante Park district where an auto salvage yard once stood.

The younger Chua, a project engineer for a contractor in San Francisco, wanted to "get her hands dirty" and brought her mother along from Vallejo.

Virgie Chua spent part of the day cutting plywood sheeting for framing one of the 28 homes under construction on a 4-acre plot not far from 98th Street and Interstate 880. Using a power saw was a "beautiful and awesome" experience, Virgie Chua said. "You're empowered. You're in control of it. It feels good."

The development, the largest Habitat project in California, will contain 54 homes when finished. Some 26 have been built and are occupied; the rest will be done by 2010.

The two- and four-bedroom two-story homes, with a cottage-chic exterior, range from 1,000 to 1,300 square feet and are designed to be environmentally friendly.

The plot was listed as a Brownfield site and 5,000 cubic yards of dirt were removed for toxic cleaning, said Krysta Morgenthaler, director of development for Habitat's East Bay branch.

Homeowners apply for participation in the program, buy the homes in which they'll live and must spend 500 hours working on the home. The Saturday project was one of 175 nationwide and sponsored by Lowe's.

Maria Martinez, 34, a stay-at-home mom, worked on the home where she and her husband, Juan, a shipping and receiving clerk, will live with their two sons, ages 3 and 11, a daughter, 10, and

Martinez's mother. The family now rents a one-bedroom apartment. Martinez once worked at a factory in Hayward molding auto parts, but had never built a house.

"My hammer skills are not too good," she said, laughing, showing a dark purple bruise along the side of her left thumbnail. "I hit it not once, but twice."

To ensure women are no longer relegated to sweeping nails, the "Women Build" initiative provides volunteer power tool trainers like Monica Mack, a systems analyst who recently helped a reluctant female homeowner get the hang of a chop saw.

"You want to learn to use this?" Mack asked her, seeing her standing in the corner.

"No, I like my fingers," the woman responded.

"By the end of the day," said Mack, "she was handing us the boards, doing all the cutting of the 2-by-4s."

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