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RIBA member serves as GC for Extreme Home Makeover

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Residents of Bristol, Kingston and Woonsocket have been impressed lately with glimpses of Richard Gere and company filming *Hachiko: A Dog's Story*, but several Rhode Island Builders Association (RIBA) members will make it to the screen first.

That's because they were involved in ABC's *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (EMHE), filmed in Warwick in February and set for national airing on May 4th.

General contractor and chief organizer for the project was Portsmouth-based Oldport Homes. Oldport's president, Eric Johnson, said he was contacted last fall about helping the Silva family of Warwick become the latest beneficiaries of the program, in which deserving families are sent on vacation while hordes of expert contractors rebuild their homes.

"Extreme Makeover contacted us in November. At the time, I didn't know anything about the show. But my staff did, and they encouraged me to pursue it. We checked with our major subcontractors and suppliers, and they were excited about it, so EMHE came to visit us in December. We visited the site, met with Warwick mayor Scott Avedisian and his people, and decided to move forward," Johnson told *The Rhode Island Builder Report*.

The project began February 18th, and it was indeed extreme: Completely demolishing the Silvas' 1,000 s/f, lead-contaminated house on Yucatan St. and replacing it with a new home three times the size - all in only a week!

"The experience was incredible! Fortunately, our staff was able to work with our subcontractors and suppliers to coordinate a schedule that allowed us to build the house very quickly. Using pre-cast concrete foundations, panelizing the walls and interior partitions in a nearby warehouse, and applying and painting some of the trim to the exterior wall panels, enabled us to finish the home ahead of schedule, despite freezing weather and a major snowstorm," Johnson said.

RIBA members pitch in

With the help of several hundred volunteers and 122 donors, Oldport Homes and its subcontractors, working around the clock, completed the job in only four days! Johnson recruited a number of other RIBA members for the project. These included subcontractors Blount Bennett Architects, Wayne Electric, Atlas Insulation, Top of the Line Fabricators, Christian Brothers Hardwood Floors, Newport Plate and Mirror Glass, Johnson and Johnson Plumbing and Heating, Cook's Overhead Doors, and Arnold Builder Inc./Sideinc.

Supplier members taking part included Andersen Windows, Consolidated Concrete, Kitchens Plus, Kamco Supply Co., JT's Lumber and Supply New England.

"The most amazing part of the project was how so many people came together and worked under chaotic conditions, at ungodly hours, without pay, and with smiles on their faces," Johnson said.

"People who never had met became friends. When someone finished their job, they asked the next person what they could do to help. We had an army of volunteers available for cleanup, unloading

trucks, serving food and just about anything that needed to be done. The truly amazing part is that when I tried to thank so many of these people for contributing their time and material, they said. 'No. Thank you for letting me be part of this!'"

A deserving family

Most of the enthusiasm came from the fact that the Silva family is so deserving. Kenny Silva, 36, drives a city garbage truck. Doreen Silva, 33, is a stay-at-home mom who home schools their children. These include two of their own, ages 12 and 14, who are both autistic. There are three adopted children, ages 2, 5 and 6, all with disabilities, as well as two foster infants. All told, the Silvas have been parents to 16 children over the past six years.

EMHE became aware of the Silvas after being contacted by their church, Warwick Assembly of God, where Kenny and Doreen both teach Sunday school. They are the first Rhode Islanders chosen for the "reality TV" show.

The family, whom the show sent off to Walt Disney World for the week the work was in progress, saw their new home for the first time on February 25th.

Their first reaction besides happiness? The new home will make it easier for them to help more children, they said.

"The hard work and long hours all were worth it when the Silva family came home. The look on their faces, and knowing that we had enabled them to be in a position to continue bringing in disadvantaged foster children, made it all worthwhile," Johnson said.

As to what the inside of the house looks like, all participants had to agree not to discuss it until after the show airs in May.

"To say this has been a life-altering experience would be an understatement. From the day Oldport Homes decided to get involved in the project, I have been overwhelmed and humbled by the outpouring of support from just about every part of the Rhode Island and beyond.... It is truly amazing what can happen when a community comes together," Johnson wrote in a letter published in The Providence Journal.

For more information and photographs of the project, visit www.oldporthomes.com/extreme.

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