

Alaska This Month: An Events Calendar


Alaska
This Month

AlaskaBusiness

August 1998

MONTHLY

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This
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Bytes!





Clark James Mishler

A few of hundreds who came together to build Mother Alice Lawrence a new home. The home is used as an outreach center to help feed and clothe the poor. Alice and her husband, Jake, are pictured front and center.

The House That Business Built

For more than 20 years, Mother "Alice" Lawrence has poured love into Anchorage's Mountain View Community and the surrounding area. She clothes the poor. She feeds the hungry. She stands up to drug dealers and gang leaders. She's even been known to give free haircuts. This year, the community gave back.

by Gail West
Project Organizer

“Field of Dreams” had it right—build it and they will come. Of the loosely knit group that formed the base for the volunteer effort to build the new Mother Lawrence house in Anchorage, I was the unbeliever. Perhaps I should say I needed to be shown that a house could indeed be built when we had no money, no formal organization, and no leader.

The group knew that Mother Alice Lawrence and her husband Jacob had been feeding and clothing the poor from their house in Mountain View for more than 20 years. We also knew that years of abuse had taken its toll on the nearly 40-year-old home. Alice had knocked out bearing walls to provide more space for her mission, and called upon her overtaxed electrical wiring to support multiple freezers. The roof sagged, and the porch had separated from the house.

Then at a 1996 Alaska Black Caucus conference, Mother Lawrence told an employee of First National Bank that she needed a new house, and that she had been guided to speak to him about it. That launched the snowball.

An ad hoc group began to form. Tim Sullivan, executive director of Alaska Craftsman Home Program; Bill Green, a representative from Parkside Church in east Anchorage; Catherine Ranger, a volunteer who had gained experience in home building with Habitat for Humanity; Robin Ward, a representative from the Anchorage Homebuilders Assn.; and Lance Newman and I, from First National, began meeting regularly in late '96 to try to figure out how to build Alice her house.

A design was among the first things we needed. For that, we called the Alaska Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and talked to its president, Sam Combs. Combs owned Karluk Design and had a history of taking on volunteer projects.

“We like to do projects for the community,” Combs said, “so I talked with my partner and we took it on.” Combs began to attend the meetings.

Combs drew a set of blueprints for the new house, designing around the in-place basement and providing the



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Mother Alice Lawrence of Mountain View in front of her new home with two of her supporters. Lawrence operates a food distribution center from her home.

Mountain View neighborhood with an improved streetscape. The design provided safe, private living quarters, as well as open space for food and clothing distribution. It had additional laundry and shower facilities in the basement for those who needed them. Combs also brought in Raj Bhargava & Assoc. and BBFM Engineering, which volunteered their work.

We needed a project manager, so I called Greg Romack, president of Davis Constructors and Engineers. He said yes, and Carl Swanson joined the group. We asked First National for a contribution to get the fundraising effort off to a solid start, and the bank donated \$20,000 in cash and marketing support.

Media coverage, including donated ads from nearly every newspaper in Anchorage and Eagle River, fueled the campaign. As a result many individuals donated directly into the Mother Lawrence House Trust account, established at the bank. Sullivan volunteered his nonprofit to lead the project because it had the needed IRS 501(c)(3) status.

A Celebrity Car Wash, led by volunteers Rose and Graham Nelson and Steve Stripling of Stripling Advertising, brought in a healthy wad of cash. Mayor Rick Mystrom and a roster of other celebrities joined the volunteer suds' brigade, with dozens of businesses donating cash and other items in support of it. Also raising funds and community awareness was a fund-raiser

Community

by Scott and Stu of the Morning Zoo. In KGOT's fund-raiser, Mother Lawrence and on-air personalities (among others) were flung into the air tied to a human sling shot, of sorts.

Finally, in early August of 1997—without the \$85,000 that we had estimated we'd need to build the house—we began demolition. Alice and Jacob took the first swing at the house with a red-ribboned sledge hammer. Then the bulldozer, provided by Baxter Excavating, started its engines and the house came down.

Lutheran Social Services provided the first temporary housing for the Lawrences. Electric Distributors, Inc. called to donate lighting fixtures. As momentum grew, more and more businesses and people joined the project. Watterson Construction Co. provided an employee, Vern Wrightson. Ken Lang, a registered land surveyor, offered his expertise with the required surveys.

We needed a building package for the new home, and pricing for that package became a critical issue. Donated funds simply couldn't cover

that and other anticipated expenses. Spensard Builders Supply stepped up with a combination of price discounts and contributions to make the package affordable.

Over the course of construction, from the site prep work to raising the walls—which began in late October—there were volunteers and donations to cover the needs. Partusch Plumbing & Heating took on the lion's share of the plumbing work; 3-Way Electric and Ram's Horn Electric wired the house; Thermo-Kool of Alaska insulated the house; and Summit Windows & Door, Inc. provided their specialties.

"Business has been good, and we were fortunate to have the time and extra crews to help," said Tony Partusch, shop foreman with Partusch Plumbing & Heating. "We also received some contributions from our suppliers and that helped, too."

Dana Nordine, owner of Nordine Painting, the company that painted the inside and the outside of the house, said his family has known of Mother Lawrence and her work for a long time. Nordine said they knew the state of the old house and knew she needed the new one. Nordine also brought The Drywall Company into the project to do the taping. "It kind of balloons," Nordine said.

Taylor Restoration's crew took a day to side the house. "It was the day after Thanksgiving when everybody was off work," Elaine Taylor, owner, said. "We brought the kids and met early in the morning. We were done by 3:30 that afternoon. We do a lot of remodeling, and usually have people out at different sites. This was nice to have everyone together—we divided up into teams and raced each other to get done. Our company just felt good about it. That's the real gift in giving. And Mother Lawrence does so much for the community."

April Reilly, co-owner of Rainproof Roofing, which provided the roof for the house, said her company usually supports good causes such as this. "We're a consistent supporter of Habitat for Humanity and others," Reilly said. "You just give because you want to give, and this is a part of Anchorage that's been neglected for many years. Public funds will go a lot

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further with donations like these to help that part of town."

On Valentine's Day of this year, Alice and Jacob moved into their new home. It was the first time Alice had been inside. "I'd been afraid to look," she said. Within days of resettling and expanding into new, larger storage space, Mother Lawrence was back in business. Alice and Jacob Lawrence are again serving a steady stream of individuals and families needing assistance with their lives.

Although only a few of the more than 150 businesses that contributed have made their way into this piece, the sample shows how many give their time, materials, expertise and money on a daily basis to make Anchorage a better place to live. Often, these businesses go unsung and unthanked. But, as Reilly so succinctly put it: "you give because you want to give."

In recognition of the hard work and contributions, the Anchorage Assembly recently passed a resolution recognizing all the participants and contributors to the Mother Lawrence House. □

REFLECTIONS

Project Organizers Comment on the Building of the House

Sam Combs, Karluk Design: "I think it's important for all professionals to give something back to their communities. This was a worthwhile project."

Bill Green, Parkside Church: "About 40 pastors in Anchorage formed a cross-denominational group, the Church of Anchorage, and this group became concerned about Mountain View. Parkside began looking for a place to get involved, and I went to visit Alice. I couldn't believe she was doing what she was doing under the circumstances. When I said 'they're going to build her a house,' my pastor said 'do it' and I did." (Parkside members strongly supported the project, donating at least \$20,000.)

Catherine Ranger, a volunteer who had gained experience in home building with Habitat for Humanity: "This just shows what people can do if they share a vision and are willing to spend the time to get it done."

Tim Sullivan, Alaska Craftsman Home Program: "It's amazing that the community could pull this off without a formal organization—just a group of people who saw a need and began contacting people we knew who contacted people they knew for donations."

Carl Swanson, Davis Constructors and Engineers: "When you look at what Alice has given the community all these years, what little we gave back doesn't compare. There was no one person that made this happen; it was truly a community effort. A lot of Mother Lawrence's faith rubbed off on the committee—there was a point that we went on blind faith, and it worked."

Gail West, First National Bank: "What do I have to say about the project? Two things: 1) thank you, Anchorage business community; and 2) I believe 'Field of Dreams.'"



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