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## **Habitat for Humanity celebrates 20 years with 145th new homeowner**

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SEBRING -- Highlands County Habitat for Humanity celebrated its 20th anniversary Thursday night with a party and fundraiser at the Sebring Convention Center.

But balloons, good food and the sense of shared mission were only the surface story. The heart of the matter lies in the 145 homes in the county where families gather under sound roofs they helped to raise.

As if the work done over the years wasn't enough, Habitat staff and volunteers are thrilled about their latest project at Mason's Ridge, a full subdivision of 59 two- and three-bedroom homes named in honor of Mason Smoak, who was on the board of directors before he died unexpectedly in 2008.

The development, part of which is still under construction, will include shopping, services, a community center, pocket parks and walking and biking trails.

No other Habitat organization in the country has tried anything like it. At a recent conference in Washington D.C., John Hawthorne, director of Highlands County Habitat, was inundated with questions about the project.

Thursday morning, Sherita Baggett became the newest Habitat homeowner, and the first Mason's Ridge resident, signing closing papers at attorney Mark Breed's office and accepting the keys to her new front door.

Baggett put in the required 400 hundred hours of manual labor, from digging trenches to nailing studs to hanging drywall.

It took two years of work and patience, but "it's been worth the wait," said Baggett, who couldn't keep a smile off her face and carried a disposable camera with which to record the moment. "I did plenty of hammering," Baggett added, singing a line from the folk song, "If I Had a Hammer."

She has worked at the Highlands County recycling center for four years, dealing with hazardous and electronic waste.

Baggett first learned about Habitat from a woman she worked for, joining the all-women's build in 2005 along with Sheriff Susan Benton.

"I liked the work," Baggett said.

Baggett has known her share of tragedy. In September of 2001, the house where she grew up and in which she lived, burned to the ground.

"It will be good to have a family home again," she said. She wants it to be the center to which her sons, 18-year-old Wesley, and 22-year-old Elbert, return to and where her future grandchildren will make memories.

Mason Smoak's widow, Tracee Smoak, and their children, her sister and parents helped Baggett move in Saturday morning.

"People don't realize what's going on out here," Smoak said. "This is a one-of-a-kind subdivision, with energy-efficient houses with its own infrastructure."

"So many people did so much to make it happen," said her mother, Beth Plank.

"The whole community gave what it could -- goods, services, tile, trees," said Smoak. "That's the wonderful thing. Habitat gives people a leg up, not a hand out. It's a full-circle program."



News-Sun photo by KATARA SIMMONS Sherita Baggett and Tracee Smoak share a moment of joy Saturday between heavy lifting, while Baggett moves into her new home.



News-Sun photo by KATARA SIMMONS Members of the Smoak family help Habitat for Humanity's newest homeowner Sherita Baggett move in Saturday at Mason's Ridge in Sebring.



News-Sun photo by KATARA SIMMONS Homeowner Sherita Baggett prepares to pick up another load Saturday morning. Baggett is the 145th person to earn a Highlands County Habitat home.



News-Sun photo by KATARA SIMMONS Sherita Baggett praises God for her new home Saturday. She is the first resident to move into Mason's Ridge.