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## Christians, Jews and Muslims build a Habitat Humanity home

By Terri Bryce Reeves, Times Correspondent  
In Print: Wednesday, January 11, 2012

Cedaizha Jackson, 10, leans against the outside wall of her new home as her mother, Tiffani Miller, and others pray during a ceremony on Sunday.



[JOSEPH GARNETT JR.]

### CLEARWATER

In an era when religious tensions run high, a local group of Christians, Muslims and Jews has come together to throw down sod and pound nails, meanwhile laying the foundation for friendships, understanding and mutual respect.

Together they built a three-bedroom, two-bath Habitat for Humanity home. It's the 235th home built by Habitat volunteers in Pinellas County, sheltering the 600th child.



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And it is Habitat's inaugural "Interfaith House" in Pinellas.

"It's the first of what I hope will be many interfaith houses," said Steve Lightburn, vice president of development for Habitat for Humanity of Pinellas County. "What's particularly significant is that it's the tenth anniversary of 9/11. This is faith in action. It sends out a wonderful message to the community."

On Sunday, a dedication ceremony for the house was held under brilliant blue skies. Dozens in attendance laid their hands on tangerine-colored walls while four religious leaders blessed the new home. In an unscripted turn, Clearwater Vice Mayor George Cretokos sneaked in a fifth blessing, using holy water from the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral's Epiphany celebration.

Then the keys were given to Tiffani Miller, a 29-year-old Campbell Park Elementary School teacher, who will live there with her daughter Cedaizha, 10.

"I especially want to thank the interfaith churches for coming out," said Miller, who was moved to tears. "Everybody just came out and they were all working so hard to help me with my house."

The 1,300-square-foot home, sold at zero profit and financed at zero percent for 30 years, is one of the first few Habitat houses located in the new Stevens Creek subdivision off N Bay Lane south of Sunset Point Road. Once the site of a blighted public housing project, the fledgling community will eventually include more than 50 energy-efficient Habitat homes of a variety of design styles.

Miller's monthly payment will be about \$700 — about \$50 less than her former apartment, which leapt from \$350 to \$750 a month when she started teaching. Higher earnings means she no longer qualified for federal housing subsidies.

Miller found the Habitat program and has worked hard for her dream, putting in the required 250 hours of sweat equity and completing a series of classes to teach her how to manage a budget, maintain good credit, get the best insurance rate — even how to garden and decorate.

"This whole experience has been an answer to my prayers," she said.

The concept of an interfaith build was suggested by Pastor Donna Oberkreser of Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Clearwater.

"I wanted the three Abrahamic faiths to work together," she said after the dedication. "We all believe in compassion for our fellow man and woman. We are more alike than different."

A Jewish friend of hers passed the idea on to Rabbi Daniel Treiser of Temple B'nai Israel in Clearwater, who had been giving sermons on understanding and respecting Islam. He then suggested the idea to a Muslim colleague and the Pinellas Park-based Islamic Society of Pinellas County, Masjid Ebad Al Rahman, became involved.

"We learned from each other and talked about the stereotypical issues we face," said Anwar Alghazzi of the Islamic Society. "We've decided to have an interfaith picnic in the future."



[JOSEPH GARNETT JR.]

Tiffani Miller smiles at her daughter, Cedaizha J., as they begin to enter their new home in Clearwater on Sunday during a ceremony that officially gave them the house.

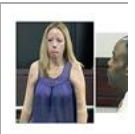
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After the dedication, attendees stood in the new kitchen and shared Middle Eastern baked goods, kosher wraps and sandwiches.

Andrea Mason, a follower of Judaism, relished the halawa, a sweet confection of sesame paste made by her Muslim peers.

"I haven't had halawa since my grandfather used to bring it to our house," she said.

*For more information on Habitat for Humanity of Pinellas County, contact (727) 536-4755.*

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