

HOME MAKEOVERS WITH HEART

Taking a cue from TV's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, real-life heroes revamped houses—and lives—for people in need

3-27-05



"I can learn from Joe, and vice-versa," says Bo Busby (left, with wife Kerri, Joe and Linda Rank, and their families at the Ranks' refurbished home).

A FAILING BODY, BUT HE'S ALL HEART

Stricken with Lou Gehrig's disease, Bo Busby builds a better life for a fellow sufferer

Bo Busby was intrigued last October when his wife, Kerri, told him about a mom she'd met at their daughter's Austin, Texas, gym. Her name was Linda Rank and her husband, Joe, suffered from ALS, the neurodegenerative illness known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The affliction had forced him to leave his job as a software engineer; now he could barely speak. Supporting the family of six on her teacher's salary, Linda knew Joe would need a wheelchair, but worried about the cost of making their home wheelchair accessible. "I felt I was caught in a riptide that kept trying to pull me out to sea," says Linda, 41, mother of Cole, 11, Hannah, 8, and twins Ryan and Patrick, 5.

Without even meeting the Ranks, Bo, 38, a real estate developer, hatched a plan that would transform the family's lives. Over the next two months he



"There was a contagious spirit throughout the project," says Bo, who drew 150 volunteers.

raised \$50,000 in donations and enlisted 150 volunteers who completely remade the Ranks' home. What makes the feat all the more remarkable is that in 2002 Bo himself was diagnosed with ALS, which has robbed him of most of the use of his left arm and weakened his leg muscles. "I knew what the Ranks were going through," he says. "I could empathize."

Busby—who has daughters Maddi, 8, and Abbi, 5, with Kerri, 36, a homemaker—first noticed tremors in his left hand in the spring of 2000. After the ALS diagnosis, Kerri suggested God might have a larger purpose for him. "He looked at me," she says, "and said, 'Just let me be angry about this right now, okay?'" He continued full days

Angels

at the office, frustrated by his waning energy and coordination. Then he found a therapeutic outlet: the Ranks' house. "This project took the focus off me, at least internally," says Busby, "and put it on someone else."

Though he had met Joe for only one brief encounter, Busby was determined to help him—and soon. "With ALS, time is a precious commodity," he says. (On average, patients survive two to five years after diagnosis.) He had his brother-in-law Sean Cockrell, a contractor, talk to the Ranks about their wish list, then e-mailed 200 friends and relatives about Rank's plight.

Others spread the word and some \$40,000 rolled in by mid-December. Retailers, electricians and plumbers offered materials, services and appliances at reduced prices. The Busbys arranged for the Ranks to spend the week at a friend's resort cabin. Then, starting Dec. 17, they worked frenzied 16-hour days. "Bo was exhausted," says Cockrell, "yet he'd say, 'I can't imagine spending my time doing anything else.'"

Returning home Dec. 23, the Ranks were shocked and delighted to see

the results: a larger kitchen fitted with new cabinets, French doors leading to a brand new deck, new paint, new furniture and appliances—and all of it accessible by wheelchair.

"I felt humbled, undeserving and supremely lucky," Joe Rank, 39, says, communicating by typing. "It was like they'd all helped me to bear this cross for a few steps." Busby says the project changed his perspective on coping with his disease. Recently he told his new friend Joe, "You are not alone. You never have been alone, and you never will be alone."



"I didn't imagine people did things like this," says Joe (seeing the transformation for the first time).



BEFORE

"It makes the burden of illness easier to bear," Linda Rank says of the remodel (on Day 1).



AFTER

Joe Rank calls the result "a perfect mix of what we needed and wanted."

By Richard Jerome and Thomas Fields-Meyer.
Kate Klise in Louisville, Anne Lang in Austin
and Lori Rozsa in Riviera Beach