

Weatherization on Wheels

By William Richards

Michael Roberson helps low income homeowners have more energy efficient, safer places to live in.

Michael Roberson of Sanford sets up an extendable frame that spans the doorway of Altamonte Springs resident Federico Medina's house. He drapes a red tarp across the open space, plugs a vacuum into the parachute-like device and snaps the motor on. The fan hums to life.

Roberson's job as home and weatherization manager for Meals on Wheels of Seminole County is to energy audit houses by sucking out their air, which lets him detect electric wasting culprits in the homes of low income families and seniors. He puts more money in their pockets by helping them save on utility bills.

Roberson tests the air pressure around the home. He finds curtains flapping in a bedroom where his vacuum is sucking through more air than it should be. "This house is leaking CFMs," he says. That's cubic feet per minute, a measurement he compares with the home's optimal air changes per minute to sniff out holes, leaks and poorly insulated places.

Medina is 71, retired and has lived in his house for 22 years. Roberson can fix his home with caulking or sealing adhesive. He'll check on Medina's refrigerator and water heater, too. Those appliances, combined with temperature units, are a house's biggest energy siphons. Roberson will help make living there more comfortable and more affordable.

Today, Roberson got up at 5:30 a.m. He drops his kids off at school, and at 10 a.m. he's giving a presentation to Meals on Wheels volunteers. "This is not someone you don't know," Roberson tells those gathered to hear about who needs help in the community. "These [clients] are our mothers and grandmothers. That's what I want to leave you with."

Afterward, he picks up his equipment from Meals on Wheels headquarters. In his office is a newspaper clipping of Barack Obama over a photograph of his daughters. Roberson is excited that his energy efficiency program will be part of the stimulus funds that Obama included in his weatherization plan. "Hopefully, with the stimulus package, I'll be able to buy a new vehicle," he says. "Maybe a hybrid to promote energy efficiency."

By lowering his client's electric bills, Roberson cuts down utility demand. That can make energy cheaper for everyone. His work is just one way that Meals on Wheels is helping the community.

When he's not helping, Roberson is a praise singer at New Destiny Christian Center. At one client's house,

he discovered a hole in the roof. Situations like that are when he looks to God for answers. "There have been phone calls that have come through this office when I needed them the most," Roberson says. "Where the community comes together, [we] make it work."

The need of his clients is dire. Many of the low income families Roberson helps are so grateful, they call him their angel. He counts his blessings: his family is in good health, and his job is to help the helpless.

"We are our brother's keeper," Roberson says. "Everybody needs somebody. Don't get so busy and so wrapped up into yourself until you can't reach back and help somebody else."

Roberson goes to sleep with his clients in his prayers. One woman's house had been completely devoured by termites. He'll soon meet new clients in similar scenarios. Another red tarp will go up, and he will leave residents like Medina in better shape than when he met them. He says it was a "divine set-up" that put him in a position to be his clients' last hope. ■



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Michael Roberson helps homeowners who sometimes need more help than he can give.

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