Habitat for Humanity gets a hand from students at Rice

School's service organization takes the lead building and designing Centennial House

By Joél Karcynzy

When you think of extracurricular college activities, what comes to mind? Theater, debate, lacrosse? How about power tool initiation and well-constructed housing located on campus? That's exactly what's on the minds of students who belong to the Rice University chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

To mark the school's 100th anniversary, the group will break ground and begin in the construction of the Rice Centennial House, a project already underway in the making.

"I envision this project as a way for the university to show its commitment to the city," says Twinkle Jaypor, past president of the chapter and senior of the Centennial project. "It helps to show how much value Rice adds to the city."

"The university gives the students a unique gift — knowledge and skills. It's important that the students give back to the community."

Jaypor hopes the Centennial House, which will be built in the Finn Ward, will provide the Rice students with a sense of accomplishment beyond the classroom. "They can look back and see that they've built and helped families," she said.

The Rice Habitat for Humanity chapter is the largest service organization on campus. The nonprofit group builds homes for low-income families and raises student awareness about poverty issues.

"The Rice Centennial House project has given us a chance to really grow as a chapter — to work together to maximize our group's skill set and bring in new resources from within the Rice community to help achieve our goals," chapter president Felipe Rodriguez said.

Since 1986, Rice students have built three houses and worked on many more in cooperation with the Houston and the Fort Bend chapters of Habitat for Humanity. The chapter has more than 100 volunteers ready to wield hammers, and the Centennial House is the students' largest project yet.

Typically, when a business or organization approaches Habitat for Humanity about building a house, it raises the $17,000 in costs and raises one of the nonprofit's standard blueprints. Habitat for Humanity supplies the materials and the lot for the house.

For the Centennial House, the Rice students are going another route. "We designed the house, we acquired the lot and purchased the materials," Jaypor explained. "We've been trenching the boundaries, the six-inch-old oil well, creating the amount of leadership creatively provided by Habitat volunteers.

The three-bedroom Centennial House was designed by recent graduates of the Rice School of Architecture. The design is all about sustainability and includes a geothermal solar system, solar panels, a long-lasting metal roof, heat-reflecting windows that warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and a rainwater collection system. In addition, the design keeps with Habitat for Humanity's founding principles: it's easy to construct and low cost.

Browns, a Houston native, said Habitat for Humanity has showed a lot of interest in the Centennial House, which is a departure from their typical design.

"At what we're looking at sustainability, they want us to do something that made them really interested in this project," she said. Take, for example, the layout of the kitchen and two bathrooms. The rooms are designed to be efficient and use the plumbing and electricity to the best.

The project has picked up praise thanks to Rice and Build the Architecture Center Houston Foundation and found partners in the Rice Design Alliance, Green Mountains Energy, Lovett Homes, TSPG Partnership Corp., Hayes Whaley Associates and Harvey Cleary.

The students are appealing to the family, friends and Rice alumni through their website, habitat.rice.edu. An online Family: Friends from eligible students to reach personal fund-raising letters, Jaypor, a Pittsburgh native with a double major — geology science and evolutionary biology — and minor in biochemistry and cell biology, wants more. He envisions the campus Habitat for Humanity reaching $500,000 in donations to create an endowment, which would purse future homes for deserving families.