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## Volunteers dress up House of Nines area

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Nycole Durham's house is yellow.



The La Vista Community Foundation provided Nycole Durham's home with a fresh coat of yellow paint, which her 6-year-old son, Jacob, helped to choose.

Really yellow.

Durham, 27, admits that she was skeptical when her 6-year-old son Jacob picked out the eye-popping hue for her two-bedroom home in La Vista's House of Nines neighborhood. But she has since grown to love the day-glo color.

Neighbors, who could have complained, have instead complimented Durham on the new look of her formerly brown house.

Volunteers had painted the house last year as part of a new neighborhood revitalization program run by the La Vista Community Foundation.

"I'm a single mom, so any help I can get is great,"

Durham said. "It looks a lot better than it did before."

A neighborhood of nearly 50-year-old homes wouldn't constitute a historic district in most cities. But the 334 homes in the House of Nines have vintage cachet in La Vista, which has been a city for only 46 years.

The neighborhood near 72nd and Harrison Streets was La Vista's first residential development.

A push to preserve the homes began in 2000. It wasn't until last year, however, that the actual revitalization began.

In what has been dubbed the House of Nines Safe and Sound Homes Project, volunteers from local businesses painted five homes and did repairs to another home at no cost to the owners. The supplies were paid for through donations to the La Vista Community Foundation. Residents, like Jacob, may choose whatever color paint they want.

This year, the foundation hopes to expand the program and paint nine homes, said Executive Director Valerie Russell. It also plans to subsidize home-repair loans for as many as four houses and provide grants to fix up two homes.

Russell said that the cost of repairs right now is minimal.

"If we waited until the homes fall into serious disrepair, it would cost much more to fix the problem," she said.

A tour through the neighborhood of modest one-story homes reveals that many are well-maintained, while others have suffered the ravages of time and the elements.

For many people in La Vista, the House of Nines is more than just a group of aging homes. The neighborhood is a testament to La Vista's working-class origins.

The homes were built in 1960 on what was then farmland and could be purchased for \$9 down and \$99 a month, with a list price of \$9,999, earning the neighborhood its nickname.

The homes attracted families who couldn't afford to buy homes elsewhere. Though additions have been built onto many of the homes, they originally were just 700 to 800 square feet, Russell said.

### How to apply

Applications for the House of Nines Safe and Sound Project are available by calling (402) 960-9625 or e-mailing [vrussell@la-vista.us](mailto:vrussell@la-vista.us). Applications are due May 31. The program is also looking for volunteer workers.

The neighborhood got off to a rocky start, however. Some families had trouble making the payments, and a third of the homes were foreclosed upon or were for sale by 1963. The city borrowed \$1.3 million that year to stay afloat.

"There is some sentimentality with that neighborhood," said La Vista Mayor Doug Kindig. "It's important to the rest of the city. La Vista wouldn't be where it is without the House of Nines."

La Vista has come a long way since its incorporation in 1960, when it had just 1,360 residents, many of whom lived in the House of Nines. Today, the city has nearly 15,000 residents and has steadily expanded west of the 72nd Street corridor. Home values have soared in the new developments along Giles Road, where some homes are assessed at close to \$300,000.

Most of the homes in the House of Nines neighborhood are assessed between \$60,000 and \$70,000, though some are valued at \$80,000 or more.

The neighborhood is home to a large number of single mothers and elderly residents, many of whom could not otherwise afford to make improvements to the exterior of their homes, Russell said.

Margaret Ulfers, 64, long had lamented the peeling paint on the side of her home and the rotted wood on the outside of her garage. Ulfers, though, is disabled and unable to perform physically demanding tasks. Last year, volunteers put a new coat of brown paint on her home and replaced the rotted wood.

"I wouldn't have been able to do this without the volunteers," Ulfers said.

Residents must apply to the foundation for their homes to be considered for improvements. Only homes that are occupied by their owners are eligible, and they are selected based on the financial need of the owner and the condition of the home.

The revitalization effort depends upon volunteers and donations for materials.

Last year, corporate teams from Tender Heart Treasures, PayPal, Aquila and the La Vista Volunteer Fire Department were among the volunteer workers.

"Just by driving through the neighborhood," Russell said, "you can see the impact that these repairs are making."

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