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Many hands lift up barn, family
Thad Franklin died last month working to raise a barn on his family's property. On Sunday, volunteers finished the job.

By ALFRED DIAZ of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

What was old was made new, what was broken was fixed, what was left undone has been finished. And a labor that was cut short by blood, has been finished with the sweat of many, and not a tear was seen from the one who lost the most.

"It is a little overwhelming, but I am very thankful, very grateful," said Jenee Franklin, as she watched as close to 50 people finished the construction work on a dairy-barn conversion, where she and her husband made plans for their future. And as she watched the work, she said, "It needs to be done, and I needed the help."



Volunteers work on the nearly finished Franklin family barn. Owner Thad Franklin died last month while working on the project and volunteers on Sunday finished the job. U-B photo by Joe Tierney

Franklin does not come across as a woman who needs anyone's help. At a time when most would be emotionally broken, she showed no tears, but only strength.

"I have to be, I don't have a choice," she said, and paused for only a couple seconds to collect herself, as if refusing to break down in front of so many people. Then she tightened her lips and said, "My husband and I, we always were go-getters."

Last month, on Sept. 18, Franklin's husband was installing a wall that would hold an industrial-size garage door. It was to be the cargo entrance of their new warehouse. The barn would become a distribution center for their soon-to-arrive shipment of 24,000 Zip-It openers. The couple was investing together on a device that can quickly and safely open plastic clamshell packages (the almost impossible to remove wrappers). But while installing the wall, Thad lost control of the massive structure and it cost him his life as it came crashing down on him.

"He had been working on the barn for three to four months and was almost finished," Franklin said, while watching the work quickly progress on Sunday afternoon. What would have taken her husband days or even weeks to complete was now only a couple hours from finished, all because of four dozen volunteers.

"It is amazing, It just makes me proud that it is getting done," she said. All day they worked, as the wind blew incessantly, sometimes knocking over stacked siding. Grey clouds colored the sky, creating a pleasing contrast to the distant Blue Mountains. And occasionally a shaft of light would break through onto on a volunteer, lighting the way for a well driven nail, a straightly ripped board or a tasty casserole set down for a hungry crew.

While the work went on, 50 yards away two dozen horses of all colors jostled each other in a corral. Their powerful and graceful movement against the backdrop of the Blues looked like a Remington come to life. They are the Franklin's other business.

Eight years ago, after marrying, the couple moved to Walla Walla to start a life here because they wanted to raise a family in a small community. Their business was the Double F Ranch off of Stovall Road, where they leased and boarded horses to outfitters, summer camps and guest or dude ranches. Their family consisted of Thad, Jenee and 17-month-old Maddaly, who right now was taking her middy nap as the work continued.

"These people were carving their life out of this ground, and they were making a go of it," said Mark Etchelle, senior pastor of City Church of Seventh-day Adventists. He remembers when he heard about the accident that killed a member

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from a neighboring Adventist church.

"We all knew that there was something that was needed," he said.

It was Franklin's 65-year-old neighbor, Ken Frazier, someone she and her husband rarely spoke to, who brought the church and the Franklins together. About a week after the accident, Frazier said he was driving by, and he had been wanting to talk with Jenee. But since the accident, there were too many people around for his comfort. So when he saw mother and daughter playing in their yard, he stopped and asked how things are going.

"I did very little, I can't take much credit," Frazier said. But when he learned about the unfinished barn conversion, and how the Zip-It openers were arriving in a couple weeks, he knew he needed the help of a friend.

The next morning Frazier had breakfast with his buddy Roger Rowe, who remembers exactly how he got involved.

"He (Frazier) said to me, 'Roger, I know you know how to get ahold of people, and we need to help them.'" Rowe recalled.

What followed a series of phone calls made by Rowe, including one to Etchelle. And between the two men, they were able to gather the support of a half-dozen local construction businesses, dozens of church members and other volunteers, who provided the labor, money or both to get the job done. And in some cases it seemed like providence the way things fell in place.

Rowe told of how he was out inspecting roads, and just by chance the owner of the gravel company -- who rarely drives a rig -- was delivering that day. That owner saw Rowe, struck up a conversation and asked him what he was doing Sunday. When Rowe told of the accident and explained he would be finishing the work on the Franklin barn, the owner came back later with a bill and check. The bill was for gravel delivered to the Franklins, the check for just under \$500.

"He wrote 'void' on the check and put 'paid in full' on the bill and said, 'Give this to her.'" Rowe said.

Coincidence?

"I don't believe it. This is so much bigger than coincidence," Etchelle said. "I have found that if we do what needs to be done, God will supply the needs." And also supply the heart for the work, he added.

"This is just as good for the people doing the work as it is for the people being helped out," Etchelle said. Then he told about the agoraphobic volunteer who rarely left his home, and how he came out Sunday to help. Or the ex-convict who can't find a job, and how he had a chance to work and socialize with established builders. Then there was one young man who hadn't really planned on doing much of anything Sunday.

"I asked him what he would be doing; he said, 'Watching TV or homework. This is great, can we do it again.'"

Then Etchelle said, "We can do this again. If there is somebody who has had a tragedy, we can help them out."

Around late afternoon the helpers had finished. The wind seemed to let up a bit, and the sky showed an occasional patch of blue over the Double F Ranch - where the horses jostled each other all day.

Etchelle, Rowe and the throng of volunteers put away their tools and claimed their casserole dishes. Looking at the soon-to-be-filled warehouse, it was obvious the conversion was still a work in progress.

But it would do for Jenee Franklin, who made it clear she doesn't want a lot of people coming to help. But this job was too much for her. So she is grateful. And if people still want to help, perhaps they can through yet another work in progress - through faith.

"It (faith) made me strong, it helped a lot; I probably could not do it without a lot of support."

Alfred Diaz can be reached at alfreddiaz@wwub.com or 525-3300, ext. 272.



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