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For one family, indoor bathroom is new territory

By Jason Jacks

In the shadow of million-dollar estates and sprawling horse farms, Hattie Reid stood in the narrow mudroom of her century-old log house, pointing out a door at what used to constitute her bath: a tin tub hanging from a shed.

"We would drag it in and put it right here," she said, gazing down at the floor of the home she's lived in her entire life. "It's not bad when you're used to it. You just close the curtains and enjoy yourself."

But, she excitedly added, "No more."

That's because this spring, Hattie Reid, 80, along with older sister Emma Reid, 93, and nephew Leon Reid, 74, who all live together near the tiny community of Bloomfield south of Bluemont, were given what most residents take for granted -- an indoor bathroom, outfitted with a sink, toilet, tub and separate shower.

Volunteers with the nonprofit Rebuilding Together: Christmas in April in Loudoun County built the bathroom using mostly donated items and free or significantly reduced labor. Though not working as of July 2, the Reids' indoor toilet will be hooked up sometime in early July. A celebration is planned for July 18.

"It is unbelievable how many people don't have running water," said the nonprofit's executive director, Rich Green, a former resident of Leesburg who now lives in Prince William County. "I think there would be a lot of people in Loudoun who would be surprised that these types of situations still exist."

County officials said they are unsure of the exact number of homes in Loudoun today that are still without an indoor bathroom. But a county report prepared in early 2007 estimated the number then at about 140.

This is not the first time attention has been placed on Loudoun's outhouses. In 2007, the county government completed a lengthy and well-publicized project that supplied indoor plumbing for about a dozen homes in the African American community of Willisville in western Loudoun.

Green said his group generally helps up to 35 families in need, like the Reids, annually. This year, though, because of dwindling donations and a shrinking corps of volunteers, the group had to turn down at least a dozen requests for similar projects in Loudoun.

For the Reids, who know of several neighbors who still use outhouses or portable toilets, the indoor bathroom is a welcome change. But, admittedly, one that may need some getting used to.

"I might miss it," said Leon Reid, eyeing the family's faded green outhouse with a half-moon cut into its wood-plank door. "But I don't know. I'm so used to it."

But for Hattie Reid, remembering hurried walks to the outhouse through drenching rain or bitter cold, the transition from outdoor to inside is easier to accept.

"Oh, I hope they tear it down," she said without pause. "I'm not going to miss it. We're glad to get a bathroom."

To learn how to volunteer or to make a donation to Rebuilding Together: Christmas in April in Loudoun County, e-mail rtcinalc@gmail.com or call 703-771-7186.

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