



PAUL EGGERS/PAUL@NEWSRECORDANDSENTINEL.COM

Volunteers from Holy Trinity Episcopal in Greensboro install a new metal roof on a home in the Grapevine community.

# VOLUN-TOURISM

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Fisher Branch, Lower Shut In and Sandy Bottom are roads that even a Madison County native may consider off the beaten path. For a growing number of summer visitors however, time spent in those tucked hollers are the highlight of their visits to the county.

"We find a lot of beauty here," said Betsy Lane, a volunteer youth adviser with Holy Trinity Episcopal in Greensboro. "Our time and our service here is hard to describe. It just feeds us."

For 30 years, congregants of central Carolina church have come to Madison County offering assistance to those in need. With church vans full of eager, young volunteers, the group used to simply drive up to a local home, introduce themselves to the owners and, with their permission, get started on a small improvement project.

Those trips have since evolved to more organized annual visits. Under the leadership of the Community Housing Coalition of Madison County, a local nonprofit dedicated to safe and affordable housing for local residents, the church is now just one of nearly 30 organizations providing nearly 1,000 volunteers focused on improving living conditions for locals.

"We see ourselves as a bridge between volunteers and the community," said CHC Executive Director Christopher Brown. With the help of groups from places as far off as Pennsylvania and Texas, CHC is able to mobilize an estimated 10,000 hours of volunteer labor to maintain and repair Madison County homes. Brown estimates summer crews will complete 31 significant jobs, including nine new roofs, that will positively impact the lives of nearly 100 community residents.

"It's heaven-sent and a real blessing," Jason Gosnell said as he watched Holy Trinity crews replace the roof on his father's home. "The new roof is definitely needed. In the winter, the roof leaks and doesn't hold heat. If there's snow on it, it'll find a hole somewhere."

Coordinating the summer volunteer efforts underscores CHC's outreach across the entire county. Though the nonprofit recently fell short of securing a \$150,000 grant to expand capacity, that setback has not slowed down the nonprofit's work.

"We continue to embrace what we already have and we're expanding our efforts to network and build awareness across all corners of the county," said Brown, highlighting the impact of an ongoing listening tour that has already sent board members to engage with community leaders in Spring Creek and Hot Springs. CHC has also been the driving force behind a local restaurant initiative that sees 10 percent of a day's sales benefit nonprofits. Zuma is hosting the weekly benefit on Wednesdays for CHC throughout July; Good Stuff will participate in August.

"It's a win-win, driving customers to local businesses and starting the conversation around the need for safe and affordable housing," said Brown.

## Economic impact

Bringing in volunteers to improve living conditions for locals has also helped the bottom line of local businesses. Brown estimated that over the past three years, volunteers visiting



COURTESY OF GLORY RIDGE

Volunteer crews join together ahead of service work.



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Young congregants from Holy Trinity Episcopal in Greensboro get ready to call it a day after repairing a roof in the Grapevine community.

from across North Carolina and around the Southeast have added more than \$300,000 to the local economy.

"Every single one of those groups brings in anywhere from 15-50 people for anywhere from six to 12 days," he said. "While they're here, they cover the cost of lodging at Mars Hill University, at Glory Ridge, or at a campground. Almost all of them go to Zuma at least once or twice to get a Rocket Shake and more. A lot of them go to The Depot on Friday. Some will work a half day and raft with a local company. They submerge themselves in Madison County, and it definitely has a real economic impact."

Business like Ramsey Lumber on U.S. 25-70 and Gentry Hardware in Hot Springs benefit by selling the supplies and tools needed to complete the home repairs. Looking over a receipt for

Holy Trinity, Sherry Ramsey listed a few of the supplies the group picked up on a recent stop. "They came in for pressure-treated wood and metal roofing," she said. "I didn't even total it up because they said they'd come back and get more."

A native of the county, Ramsey praised the efforts to mobilize outside support for local families. "It's great to see the older people get taken care of. I know they've done porches, redone roofs and even built sheds for firewood."

"Groups have been coming through for years to pickup things like screws and paint," said Keith Gentry of Gentry Hardware. "It helps. It definitely helps business and it helps. There are always good kids coming through who want to work and want to help people. It's really good to see."

## Spiritual center

Glory Ridge, a multi-denominational Christian camp in the Walnut community, hosts a handful of the churches that volunteer with CHC. Jennifer Reda works full-time as the camp's director of ministries and also serves on the CHC board. That dual role gives her a unique perspective on the impact volunteers have on the community, and how their experiences in Madison County shape the hard-working visitors.

"Glory Ridge is more a community than a place. It's not just a campground," said Reda. "There are traditions and particular ways of the 'Ridge' that we teach and uphold. For our ministry, we're about giving youth the opportunity to put their faith in action. From a CHC perspective, it's a consistent and reliable flow of boots on the ground for 10 weeks straight. It's important to have that consistency for CHC."

"The two organizations may have different missions, but the collaboration between them brings a lot of actions throughout the summer: the action of opening the hearts of kids, the action that takes place during connections between volunteers and local residents, and the logistical action of putting up new stairs at a home or a new roof over a house."

Lawton Gresham joined the Holy Trinity Episcopal group for the first time this summer. While taking a break from roof repairs at the Gosnell home in the Grapevine community, the high school student reflected on his volunteer experience in Madison County. "People here really do welcome you," he said. "They welcome you into their homes. You can feel the happiness in this community and the atmosphere is beautiful."