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'IT'S FANTASTIC'

Home Free

West Side woman's friends help restore her house — a building once labeled uninhabitable

BY JUAN-CARLOS RODRIGUEZ Journal Staff Writer

Three months ago, Stephany Colina's West Side home was so full of mold an appraiser said it was uninhabitable. Colina, practically bedridden with an immune system disorder, moved out and hoped she'd be able to move back in.

"I said, 'Oh, God, somebody please help me.' And they did," Colina said.

On Saturday, Colina was surprised by several of her former classmates from Sandia Prep and other friends who welcomed her back to her renovated house.

"Hopefully it will be a healthy place for her now," said Bera Dordoni, a naturopathic doctor who went to high school with Colina and coordinated the renovation effort.

"It's fantastic," Colina said as she chatted with the friends who surprised her with a welcome home party.

Dordoni and her husband, Ron, an architect and contractor, along with some of Colina's old friends like Anne Wilsher, took on all the work and much of the cost of the extensive repairs.

"Stephany's always helping other people," Wilsher said. "She got help this time."

Colina's home was almost entirely renovated.

The American Red Cross put on a new roof, most of the walls and carpeting were replaced, all new windows and appliances were installed, the home was treated for mold, the front yard was landscaped and the house was painted inside and out.

Colina, 51, said the mold started from the leaks in her roof, and she was working too much to do

anything about it. Then she got sick after a root canal and everything went from bad to worse, she said. Colina could no longer work and gets by with disability payments.

A difficult time

After Dordoni convinced her to move out, Colina's problem was how to pay for the repairs, which cost thousands of dollars. She said she decided to take out a home loan, but the first appraiser who came out told her the home was in such bad shape he would list it as uninhabitable.

Finally she got a loan and her friends got to work.

Dordoni operates BASTIS, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to rescuing both animals and people in need. Dordoni said BASTIS, which is based in Rio Rancho, is a double acronym for Bringing All Souls Together In Spirit and Build and Strengthen The Immune System.

Because of the organization's nonprofit status, the group was able to get most of the building materials at cost and much of the furniture and appliances at discounted prices. Dordoni and her husband donated their work for the cause, and Colina's other high school friends chipped in more than \$2,500 to help cover expenses, Dordoni said.

Oleta Saunders was Colina's music teacher at Sandia Prep and donated some furniture.

"I remember her wonderful laugh and spontaneity," Saunders said. "She was just a delight to be around."

Colina said her illness first came to light in 2005, when her body swelled up after the root canal. She said she went to doctors for about a year, receiving diagnoses that included lupus.

"I didn't even want to know the rest of the stuff when they kept going," Colina said, referring to other diagnoses doctors gave her.

But none of the medicine she was taking was helping her, and that's when she went to see Dordoni.

"She didn't respond to my regimen, so I wanted to see how she was living," Dordoni said.

When Colina finally agreed to show Dordoni her home, Dordoni was shocked by what she saw.

"There was nothing left, not even a bed, that was not covered in mold," Dordoni said. "I walked out crying. I told her to move out, that she couldn't live like this."

Dordoni said she is sure the mold has been playing a large part in Colina's health problems.

'I'm all excited'

All of Colina's friends who chipped in to help her said she deserves her nice new living environment.

"We wanted to do something for her because she's always doing something for someone else," said Jena Wilmouth, who used to work with Colina at an insurance company.

Before her illness incapacitated her, Colina worked for Royal Health Care, the city of Albuquerque and as an English as a second language teacher, including a stint in California at an Ethiopian-Somali-Afghan refugee camp.

Since she moved out of her house last Thanksgiving, Colina's health has improved and she's walking on her own again.

On Saturday, although overwhelmed by the reception at her home, Colina reflected on how she got there.

"I burned the candle at both ends for too long," she said. "So many of us here in this country think that we have to. If I can get anybody to not go through this ... You've got to sleep and take care of yourself."

Despite her health setbacks, Colina is already looking forward to the next stage of her life.

"I'm all excited," she said, "I'm trying to decide if I want to learn Vietnamese or Navajo. And I'm learning how to help myself."



MARLA BROSE/JOURNAL Stephany Colina, whose southwest Albuquerque home was infested with mold, came home to find a renovated home and a large group of friends to celebrate the homecoming.

Standing beside her is Bera Dordoni, left, a friend from high school and a naturopathic doctor, who organized the effort. "It's fantastic. I had no idea," Colina said of her home. At the door is DeLois McGinnis, another of Colina's friends.



MARLA BROSE/JOURNAL A note welcomes Stephany Colina home after high school and family friends and neighbors surprised her by fixing up her southwest Albuquerque home.

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