

# FOND DU LAC THE REPORTER

## Chance meeting leads FdL brothers to volunteer project

By Heather Stanek

Joe and Jason Buechel still bear the scrapes and bruises that came from working 15-hour days without pay.

They undertook an atypical volunteer job the week before Memorial Day — placing stone in a home in only four days. The project, which would normally take two to three weeks, required an 830-mile journey, four hours of sleep per night and a few wise-cracks to keep the spirits up.

“A lot of people in our profession would say we’re nuts, that we can’t do this,” said Jason.

But the men said they had to — sick children and stressed parents depended on it.

The brothers, who work at Natural Stone Veneers International in Fond du Lac, took a caravan to Zirconia, N.C., to work on the Believe in Tomorrow House at Pinnacle Falls. When it opens in July, the facility will operate much like a Ronald McDonald House, providing shelter to military families with ill children who require medical care.

Natural Stone Veneers donated 12,000 pounds of stone, and the brothers, their relatives and friends gave their time. Joe said the project probably would have cost \$45,000 to \$50,000.

“It’s an organization that we believe in,” said Jason.

### Virtue in Vegas

The Buechels, who adopt at least one volunteer project a year, said they’d never heard of Believe in Tomorrow and Pinnacle Falls. Brian Morrison,



Brothers Joe, left, and Jason Buechel, both of Fond du Lac, recently returned from North Carolina, where they, friends and family members helped build a home that will house military families of hospitalized children. The brothers run Natural Stone Veneers International on Rolling Meadows Drive and volunteered materials and time to help build the house for the Believe in Tomorrow organization. (The Reporter photo by Patrick Flood)

the nonprofit’s founder and chief executive officer, worked out of Maryland and knew little of Fond du Lac.

How did strangers so far apart meet?

Morrison said Lady Luck smiled on him during a trip to Las Vegas, but her fortune came from a booth, not a slot machine. He said he wandered among 100,000 people at the International Home Builder Show in January, searching for donations. That’s not an easy task in the midst of a recession.

Then he stopped at an exhibit for Natural Stone Veneers.

“This guy came up and introduced himself as Jason Buechel,” Morrison recalled. “I started telling them about this house, and he said without hesitation ‘Count us in.’”

Morrison returned to Maryland, the Buechels to Fond du Lac. From there, they exchanged information, organized plans and shipped the stone. The brothers rallied together 10 to 15 family and friends who they dubbed the A-Team because “you have to get a little crazy on these jobs,” said Jason.

When D-Day arrived, the group filled the coolers, loaded their vehicles with tools and supplies and departed. The first caravan left at 6 a.m. Sunday, May 17. Jason, who participated in an Ironman competition over the weekend, left with the second group Sunday night.

Both arrived on Monday and everyone put in a nine-hour day, despite taking turns driving and catching little sleep on the 14-hour ride. Jason added that they blew a tire along the way but quickly replaced it with the spare and continued.

“When you do stuff like this, that’s how you do it,” Jason said.

### **Toil by flashlight**

Although the site was in the mountains, crews had little time for sightseeing. Fifteen-hour days followed, with volunteers working from the crack of dawn to beyond sunset. Morrison said he watched the sleep-deprived men work equally hard by sunlight and flashlight.

“In 27 years, I have honestly never seen such an extraordinary act of volunteerism,” he said. “That company just did something that really was amazing in every way.”

Pictures from the trip show them standing along walls and balancing on a scaffold, preparing and setting field stone in walls and a chimney. One man holds his scraped hand near a rock with crimson splotches — a testament to the risks of the job.

When finished, they washed the walls with masonry detergent to remove dust and bring out the colors, said



Jason Buechel, left, and his uncle, Dave Patoka, add stone to a chimney on the Believe in Tomorrow House at Pinnacle Falls in Zirconia, N.C. (Submitted photo)

Joe. The A-Team then returned to the volunteer housing to nurse wounds with Band-Aids and to celebrate.

“It’s hard work,” Jason said. “If you’re going to do it, do it. If you’re not, get out.”

### **Benefits**

Joe said they accepted the project to provide respite for children who live with pain and parents who face a financial, emotional breakdown.

“These children suffer, and there’s not much normalcy in their lives,” he said. “(The home) takes their minds away from the treatments so they can relax.”

He added that it means more to help families who have served their country.

Jason noted that Natural Stone Veneers benefits by creating a positive image. And the project, while entirely donated, can warrant a tax deduction of \$5,000 to \$7,000 for the company.

Morrison added that homes, often built near oceans and mountains, can turn stressful chemo treatments into a mini vacation.

“It helps families believe in tomorrow by giving them a wonderful environment,” he said. “Our message is one of hope.”