

spirit

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

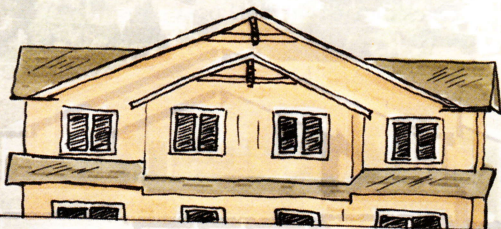


A NEW REALITY TV SERIES CALLED *ON THE FLY* TELLS THE STORY OF LIFE AT SOUTHWEST AIRLINES. THE REALITY OF THE *MAKING* OF THAT SERIES? WELL, IT MEANS NUTTY FILM CREWS, BUSTLING AIRPORTS, AND...*YOU!*

BY SWAPPING HIS PC FOR A HAMMER AND NAILS,
ONE WRITER LEARNED A LIFETIME'S WORTH ABOUT HABITATS,
HUMANITY, AND THE GIFT OF GETTING YOUR HANDS DIRTY.

TRADE OF THE TOOLS

BY JOHN ROSENTHAL



GROWING UP THE child of two editor parents, I learned a lot about how to fix things like run-on sentences and comma splices. Over summer vacation, my father would even give me assignments, which he would mark up with a red pen to improve my writing.

I did not, however, learn much about home repair. Neither of my folks was particularly handy; the only power tools we had in the

house were typewriters. But because we lived in a Manhattan apartment, where there was always a super to fix things, I never needed to acquire any such skills.

That all changed when I moved to Los Angeles nearly a decade ago and bought my first house. Suddenly, there wasn't a handyman on call whenever a pipe leaked or the dryer broke. I was going to have to learn to do these things myself.

It was about this same time that I started volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. I wasn't the first person to get involved with Habitat in hopes of learning useful skills. But the first few times I volunteered, the jobs they assigned me had few practical applications for a novice homeowner. I spent my first day demolishing the dilapidated structure where a new house would go. The second time, I hauled wheelbarrows full of sand and dirt. The third time, I dug ditches.

When I finally laid my hands on a hammer and nails, I showed little promise. The first nails I tried to drive into wood ended up as gnarled as crazy straws. Not realizing the strength of the cordless drill, I stripped countless screws. My hands frequently blistered and bled.

It wasn't just the physicality of the work that made me particularly ill equipped for carpentry. It was also the unforgiving nature of construction. Writing is a craft that benefits from constant tinkering. Essays never come out perfect on the first draft; they're perpetually refined, revised, and rewritten. This very article was the product of continual adding and subtracting. That formula might work for erecting an adobe house, but not for any brick and mortar dwelling.

When you build a home, it's essential to do everything in the proper order, and to get it right the first time. Little mistakes early in the process—a wall just slightly out of plumb, for example—have a tendency to become big ones as a house inches toward completion. A rafter just 1/2 inch short means fascia boards don't line up; a catawampus floor makes for doors that won't close. Whenever I do construction, I constantly have to remind myself there is no opportunity to correct typos in the second draft.

Still, I was undeterred. The work was arduous, even grueling at times, and it gave me a newfound respect for people who labor for a living. After a full day of working on a roof under the hot Southern California sun, slipping back into my padded office chair and typing on a computer for eight hours feels luxurious.

But the rewarding feeling I got from working alongside the family that would occupy the home kept me coming back week after week. So did the friends I made: like-minded people who got a lift out of lending a hand. Whenever I'm feeling blue, a Habitat day always elevates my spirits.

In the decade since I started volunteering, I've worked on almost every part of a house, from laying foundations to painting the front door. I've installed insulation, dry wall, kitchen cabinets,

and bathroom vanities. My ratio of nails horribly disfigured to those successfully submerged into wood has improved dramatically. And I've painted bedrooms, living rooms, bathrooms—and myself—so many times I've lost count.

Working alongside Mexican and Guatemalan homeowners, I've learned the Spanish words for hammer, nails, screws, and exhausted. I've used power tools that would have frightened me a decade ago. I still know next to nothing about electricity, zilch about plumbing, and usually need a refresher course from the foreman on which screws to use for which applications. But I've learned enough to put a new roof on my own house, and I've learned that I should hire professionals when it comes to dry wall.

And yet the experiences have enlightened me in so many ways beyond the skills I've acquired. For one, I've discovered more about the Los Angeles metropolitan area than I could from any guidebook. Because most of the construction sites were in parts of the city I recognized only from crime reports on the evening news, I anticipated gunfire on every corner. What I found instead were poor but hardworking people doing their best to make their neighborhoods as pretty as possible. Residents took pride in repainting their homes or planting flowers of hope in their front yards.

In Compton, a city I previously knew only as the birthplace of gangsta rap, neighbors were elated to see Habitat volunteers putting up four new homes where a crack den used to be. Local

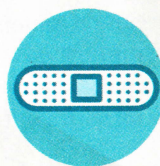
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READY TO VOLUNTEER?

FIND AN OPPORTUNITY THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU.



Study these icons for 10 seconds, then cover them with your hand. Which one springs to mind first? In Step 2, match that icon to a volunteer opportunity.



civic groups came out to applaud the groundbreaking; those who could pick up a hammer joined the construction crews, those who couldn't barbecued lunch for us.

Food has been another revelation. While other volunteers might make a beeline for the nearest fast food drive-thru, I have always sought out the local joints. A few blocks from the Pacoima Habitat site was a Salvadoran dive where I stuffed myself so full of perfect *pupusas* and falling-off-the-bone *pollo guisado* that I was useless after lunch. During a Compton build, I discovered Jay Bee's Bar-B-Que, which manages to smoke up the best beef ribs in town from its location between two busy boulevards. In South Central, on a corner not far from where the 1992 Rodney King riots took place, I braved the inch-thick bulletproof glass on the windows to find some of the tastiest fried chicken in the city.

Sometimes my fellow volunteers have tipped me off to a local gem; other times I follow my nose—literally. At a Mexican place in Lynwood, I could smell the chickens roasting on the 55-gallon drum from a block away. They tasted as good as they smelled, and at \$4.99 for an entire chicken, I had plenty of leftovers for dinner. Not every foray is a success; sometimes I ended up spending more time in the portable toilet than I would have wished. But on balance, my stomach has been as content on Habitat days as my heart.

I've also learned something about the meaning of hospitality. About a month before they were scheduled to move into their new Habitat house, the one-bedroom apartment where Martin and his family were crammed into burned down. Nobody was hurt, but they lost everything but the clothes on their backs. Four weeks later, while my fellow volunteers and I spent the morning putting the final touches on their house, Martin and his family cooked lunch for everyone. The

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setting—their new garage, still strewn with sawdust, lumber, and sawhorses with plywood sheets for tabletops—wasn't fancy, nor was the simple Mexican repast they cooked up. There was no booze and no entertainment other than a radio.

But the new homeowners' feelings of gratitude enveloped the afternoon. Their possessions were still few, but they delighted in taking neighbors on a tour of their new house. I've been to more extravagant parties, but never one where I felt more welcome.

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2 So this quiz isn't rocket science, but neither is volunteering! If you've got the time, energy, and desire, you're on your way to making a difference. Here are a few of many ways to do so.



Ronald McDonald House Charities provides mobile health care services, as well as low-cost or free "home-away-from-home" accommodations for families who must travel for a child's medical care. Pitch in by cooking, fundraising, hosting social events, or cleaning. rmhc.org



The National Park Service manages nearly 400 parks from sea to shining sea. Opportunities run the gamut, from tracking birds of prey at San Francisco's Alcatraz Island to donning period dress as a historical interpreter at Virginia's Jamestown National Historic Site. nps.gov



The American Red Cross has responded to emergencies since its 1881 founding by Clara Barton. In addition to providing disaster relief, volunteers (who make up ninety-five percent of the organization's workforce) also teach CPR and swimming, and assist with blood drives. redcross.org



StudentMentor.org matches working and retired professionals with college students who are nearing graduation and looking for academic and career counseling. Mentoring can take place either face-to-face or remotely, and may be short- or long-term. studentmentor.org



Feeding America works through a national network of 200 local food banks to obtain and distribute more than 3 billion pounds of food to 37 million Americans each year. You can lend a hand by sorting, repackaging, or transporting the charity's donations. feedingamerica.org