

Generosity of strangers yields Christmas miracle for family facing adversity



The Black family, Austin and Stacey and their four children, Sadie, left, Margaret, Benjamin and Madeline, stand in front of the newly cut trees that will be sawed into lumber by a group of volunteers from surrounding states who came to help the Blacks rebuild after they lost their new home to fire.

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By RHONDA OAKS/The Lufkin News

CHEROKEE COUNTY — Christmas miracles don't always come wrapped beneath a tree. Sometimes trees themselves are the miracles.

That's the case of the family of Austin and Stacey Black, who had plenty of pine and hardwood trees on their property where they had built their dream home. Those trees, combined with the generosity of a group of strangers, proved to be the miracle the family never saw coming after the home burned down before they could even move into it.

Austin, an employee of Lufkin Industries, and his family were a few weeks from moving into the 2,500-square-foot home they had spent more than a year building on a hilltop overlooking a scenic setting near Rusk. In July, a Cherokee County sheriff's deputy called them in the middle of the night at the house they were renting in Lufkin to tell them their new home was on fire.

Further investigation proved that the home was struck by lightning. With no homeowner's insurance on the structure, the family lost its entire investment, all the building tools, a tractor and the RV that had kept the family of six from driving back and forth to Lufkin on weekends.

"I didn't believe it," Stacey said. "I thought maybe there had been a wreck down at the driveway and maybe a car had caught fire. When we got here, everything was gone.

Even the tractor had melted. We have always had insurance, and when we explained to these agencies that we were building it ourselves and that we were the contractors and we were using our life savings to build it, we just couldn't get any until we moved in."

Heartbroken, crying and unsure of their next move, Austin made the decision to start over. He would cut the wood himself from the trees on their land, and maybe after a few years they would be ready to rebuild. As an avid member of an online forestry forum, Austin had spent much of his time during the building process talking with experts and sawyers online who offered advice each step of the way. He asked the forum members where he could find an inexpensive sawmill to cut the trees. One forum member recognized Austin from months before and began asking questions. That is when the Blacks' Christmas miracle began to unfold.

Lynn Davis, a 70-year-old retired sawyer from Brookhaven, Miss., went into action. Before long, Davis had a group of volunteers planning to travel to East Texas with a portable sawmill to cut trees from the Blacks' property to help



Professional sawyer Lynn Davis looks down the saw as he guides the blades to cut lumber from a newly felled pine tree on the Blacks' property. After the family lost a new home to a fire recently, Davis and a group of other volunteers came to East Texas to help the Blacks begin the rebuilding process.

them start rebuilding. Another 80 men who could not make the trip donated more than \$5,000 to help with expenses that the men said will be given to the Blacks.

Through rain and freezing temperatures this past week, the men asked only for a meal each day, although they barely stopped long enough to eat before returning to the blustery hilltop to cut, edge and plane the pine and oak timber into the correct sizes for framing, stripping, jointing, joists and flooring the new house.

Davis said he first requested a copy of the cut list and photographs of the site. But he said he knew the story was legitimate, and he never thought twice about offering his help.

"We saw a need," Davis said. "Austin never asked for any help. His loss was more than we could ignore. We had the means to help and he had the trees. My son, Marty and I came on over. I have been a sawyer for 12 years after retiring, and last year I went over a million board feet cut."

Davis said he normally charges for his services, but the Blacks' situation was one about which he felt strongly.

"We make exceptions when it comes from the heart," Davis said. "What happened here was more than I could turn my back on. I realized this was not a scam or made up. They never asked for help, but they needed the help. I told the forestry group that, regardless of the expense, I was coming to help."

Willie Steele, 69, from Fulton, Miss., and Bill Gaiche, 68, from Chouteau, Okla., said that when Davis decided to help, they also wanted in on the trip.

"I try to do one of these a year," Steele said. "I went last year to Oklahoma to help build a church. The weather is wicked, but you don't do this because it makes you feel good. This is not a feel-good thing. You do it because it needs to be done. Knowing that you are helping somebody, you know, that is what we are supposed to do."

Gaiche said he joined the group to do anything he could for the young family whose need was obviously great.

"My friends on the forum and Willie and Lynn are good friends, and I knew this was a genuine need," Gaiche said. "I am able to do it, and I enjoy this. I am glad I was able to be here this week to help."

While Black and the other men moved the felled trees into place for loading onto the saw to be cut, others moved the newly cut wood sections to Steele, who then edged them into smooth pieces of lumber.

What moments earlier had been raw pine trees looked just like finished lumber purchased from a supply house. The men



carefully stacked the finished lumber into sections to allow air flow between the layers so the wood will dry in coming weeks.

"They just jumped into action, and with them helping we are able to move toward our goal a lot faster," Austin said. "My first reaction when they offered to do this was to say, 'No, thank you,' because you just can't accept this kind of generosity. They insisted, and even though I didn't think I needed the help, I had to humble myself and then I realized I did need the help."

The family moved a mobile home near the front grate of their property so they can live and work there. After moving his family out of Houston three years ago, Austin said, he doesn't mind the daily drive to his job in Lufkin.

Stacey home-schools their children, Madeline, 10, Margaret, 7, and two adopted from Uganda, Benjamin, 6, and Sadie, 4.

"Having a blended family and being able to home-school the children is a blessing since we have formed many friendships with other families who also home-school," she said. "Many of the other home-school moms are bringing food out here for the guys every day."

Austin said the family has come from heartbreak to hope, and they will never forget about the Higher Power who used a group of retired men who cared enough to come help his family right before Christmas.

"This is a blessing and a miracle," Black said. "Lord willing, this time, we will move in it by this time next year. I know this house will probably mean more to us because of what we have gone through."

Stacey's Clarifications:

1. The money that was raised on the Forestry Forum was to cover the men's expenses: travel, hotel, gasoline to run the sawmill, etc. We were NOT given \$5,000!
2. Austin never cried. haha! He was too busy comforting me (who cried a LOT), and trying to be strong for our family. He had one day where he was in a REALLY bad mood and I just steered clear! He was more about the business of moving forward.
3. The men that came to work here and volunteer their time did not ask for any meals. My dear friend, [Becky Oliver](#) organized for meals to be brought to the men, and a lot of my friends jumped to volunteer, and kept all of us fed all week!



The group of volunteers work around the portable sawmill they brought with them from Mississippi to help the Black family saw the trees that will allow them to rebuild their home after a fire destroyed the new one they were moving into.