

Leaks, Rats Plague Family Praying For Better Life

Everyday Everton Stephens asks God to rescue his family. When it rains, the roof leaks so much that his wife and child have to huddle in the only dry corner or they'll get soaked.

But that's not the worst part. The Stephens' home is also plagued with rats. The family stuffs bits of old cloth into the cracks and crevices of their home to keep the rats out. Still the vermin fight their way in when the family is most vulnerable - when they are sleeping...

Shuddering, Denise recalled the night a rat bit her baby. "I was sleeping and I heard Novia cry. When I got up, I saw she had blood on her finger. And then I saw the rat," she said, the disgust and panic obviously still haunting her.

Everton Stephens earns money by collecting plastic bottles from the local dump, washing them and reselling them. It isn't a great job, but he has little choice in Jamaica's depressed economy. It's the only way he can earn enough to feed his wife and little girl.

But Everton doesn't complain. He is grateful for what little they have. "I just have to give thanks to God. I ask Him for guidance and protection because living here is rough. All we can do is get on our knees and pray."

"Sadly, Denise and Everton Stephens' situation is not uncommon. They are just one example of the many desperate families who need housing in Jamaica. They live with their toddler in a makeshift shack

with a dirt floor. It's not much more than a patchwork of discarded wood and corroded metal - too poorly constructed to keep out rain," explained Robin Mahfood, president for Food For The Poor Inc., a Christian ministry working to lessen poverty's impact on families in the Caribbean and Latin America. One of the ministry's priorities is to replace these shacks with sturdy, basic homes.

Entire homes can be built for only \$2000. Last year 2000 Jamaican families were given the gift of a home through the generosity of American donors, and Food For The Poor's project to provide housing for the poorest among the poor.

"The response from the Catholic community has been great. And you can imagine the impact this outpouring of compassion has had on the families being helped. They see their prayers for help being answered. They see the hand of God at work," Mahfood said.

With thousands of people remaining on Food For The Poor's waiting list for housing, the need for contributions remains great. It is this need that compels Food For The Poor onward.

"There are so many families with problems like Everton and Denise Stephens - some much worse, in fact," Mahfood said. "Every day that passes is another day of misery for them. Every house we build is one more reason for hope among those still waiting for help."



Thousands on Waiting List — "The Stories Are Heart-Wrenching"

Hurvin Thomas, a father of six, has been forced to move out of a condemned house on the edge of the Spanish Town Highway. Unemployed, with nowhere else to turn, he is worried about the future of his youngest children - ages four, five and six. To spare them from the pain and danger of sleeping on the streets, Hurvin is begging for help.

Albertha Evans is 108 years old. Her son, 79, cares for her in a tiny patchwork shack they share. The shack's roof leaks and the cramped space inside makes life for the two unbearably hard. In desperation, they have come to Food For The Poor.

"My waiting list of needs go on and on, and all of the stories I hear are just



as heart-wrenching. Poverty in countries like Jamaica and Haiti is devastating. Thousands of men, women and children are desperately searching for simple shelter," explained Pearl Barrett, coordinator of Food For The Poor's home building effort in Jamaica. "Our home building program was created to give these poor families hope and a sense of God's mercy. Through the ministry, American sponsors provide funds which are used to build basic, cabin-style homes for the poorest of the poor."

Since 1982, thousands of houses have been sponsored and built by benefactors to Food For The Poor, Barrett said, but demand for the homes remains very high. Jamaica and Haiti have both undergone serious

economic problems in recent years. Fathers and mothers who have lost jobs often end up on the street where they become trapped in a life of abject poverty. Once homeless, it is virtually impossible for these families to recover their lives, she said.

"Tragically, some of the families seeking help from us originally lost their homes and livelihoods in a fire or one of the hurricanes that hit the island years ago. They've been struggling to survive ever since," Barrett said.

"Imagine - some of the children we are helping have never lived in a home of their own. They've never known that sense of stability or security in their lives," she said. "You can also imagine how most families react when they receive a home. Many cry tears of joy and praise God because they believe He has answered their prayers with a miracle."

As inspired as Barrett is by the success of the program, she remains concerned about the needs that remain, particularly of the plight of the children and the elderly. The fact that so many of these vulnerable souls will be homeless tonight is painful to Pearl Barrett and her staff.

"At this point, I have a backlog

of several thousand requests for homes," Barrett said. "I pray these families can sustain themselves until we can locate a sponsor for them. I pray for miracles."

