

Maryland Lawyer

News and analysis of legal matters in Maryland

Pro bono

Lawyer's handy with a writ or a wrench

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Louis J. Kozlakowski does free legal work for **Rebuilding Together Baltimore Inc.**, but he's not your average pro bono lawyer.

Rebuilding Together Baltimore is the local affiliate of a national group that provides free home repairs for elderly or disabled low-income homeowners.

In addition to taking care of the group's legal issues, Kozlakowski, a **Wright, Constable & Skeen LLP** partner who practices construction law, helps with the repairs.

"He has served a dual role for us, and it's really wonderful because he understands what we do and he understands our clients and their needs, so he's able to relate to our work a lot better," said Rebuilding Together Baltimore Executive Director Bonnie Bessor.

Rebuilding Together has been in Baltimore since 1989, though it was called Christmas in April when it began. The concept is simple: On one spring day, an army of volunteers descends on two neighborhoods, one in Baltimore and the other in Baltimore County. Smaller repairs and preparation are done year-round, but the main event is on that April day.

The neighborhoods are

chosen after an application process, and each neighborhood gets the organization's services for two years in a row. In 2008, volunteers came to Turner Station in Baltimore County and Pen Lucy in Baltimore; this year, they will go to Turner Station and Park Circle.

The volunteers, many of whom are skilled in construction, take on projects aimed at making homes "warmer, safer, drier," Kozlakowski said.

This past April, volunteers were able to do more extensive repairs than usual because Rebuilding Together Baltimore won a contest sponsored by cable television's HGTV.

Kozlakowski worked on the biggest project, Ethel Gaither's Pen Lucy home.

The goal was to make room for Gaither's grandchildren and to reconfigure the house so the severely arthritic woman would not have to climb the stairs.

The volunteers turned her living room into a bedroom, converted a half bath on the ground level into a full bath, installed new doors and windows, and put in new energy-efficient appliances, including a washer and dryer on the ground floor.

They also fixed her sewer pipe, which they found out was broken after Gaither complained of water in her basement and some of the volun-



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Louis J. Kozlakowski's efforts on behalf of Rebuilding Together Baltimore go beyond pro bono legal services; he's also been known to pitch in with the repairs.

teers saw soap suds on her front lawn.

"It's kind of like Forrest Gump," Kozlakowski said. "You never know what you're going to get until you open up the box."

He has sometimes acted as a "house captain," overseeing the repairs and materials for one property.

Kozlakowski teaches construction law for contractors at the **Community College of Baltimore County**. For the last five years, he has made volunteering for Rebuilding Together a class project.

"He's one of our superstar volunteers," Bessor said.

Sometimes, he brings along partners at Wright, Constable & Skeen to help. One has experience making major repairs, but the rest

stick to painting, he said.

On the legal front, Kozlakowski helps the organization get easements when necessary. When Rebuilding Together decided to clean up a community garden, he helped them figure out who owned the property and whether they could modify it.

He also makes sure volunteers are trained about what to do if they find asbestos or lead paint.

Asked how he learned home repair, Kozlakowski said it was the same way he learned car repair.

"When I was in law school, I didn't have time to wait for someone else to come and fix something," he said.