

The 2008 LifeWorks Home Improvement Challenge

# Designed From The Heart

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English novelist, Jane Austen, once said,

*“There is nothing like staying at home for real comfort.”*

**For the beneficiaries of LifeWorks’ 2008 Home Improvement Challenge, home just became much more comfortable.**

## LifeWorks

LifeWorks was formed in 1998 through the merger of four organizations: Child and Family Service, Pathways Community Counseling, Teenage Parent Council and Youth Options. The common goal of these organizations was to serve Austin youth and families in need of support. In the years since LifeWorks was founded, the nonprofit organization has grown exponentially and is now home to 15 different programs, including free and low-cost counseling services for youth and adults, emergency shelters, education, workforce development and supportive housing. Many of the youth served by LifeWorks have experienced abuse, homelessness, extreme poverty, abandonment and neglect. Some have “aged out” of the foster care system, leaving them with no family support, and some are now caring for children of their own. The mission of LifeWorks is “to transition youth and families from crisis to safety and success.”

More than four years ago, LifeWorks board member Melanie Fish visited the LifeWorks Supportive Housing units. Fish found that the apartments were bare, for the most part, and although they provided a safe place to live, they lacked the feeling of “home.” Fish was concerned about the effect that these barren apartments may have on the youth who occupied them, especially teen parents and their young children. It was during this time that home improvement television shows

were becoming popular and Fish was inspired; hence, the LifeWorks Home Improvement Challenge was born.

## The Home Improvement Challenge

“Studies have shown that the home environment has a direct impact on the mental health of the resident,” says Susan McDowell, executive director of LifeWorks. “We want to create an environment that gives our clients confidence.” With that goal in mind, corporate sponsors and local designers team-up each year to improve the living spaces and the lives of several young people. Each team is assigned one apartment to transform. The teams are then provided with a \$1000 gift card to assist in the project, but are responsible for all other fundraising. The teams meet with the recipient just weeks before the day of the event. During this brief meeting, the team members try to determine the needs and preferences of the client. LifeWorks provides additional incentives for the teams by presenting awards in three categories: Above and Beyond, Bold and Beautiful and Most Extreme Makeover. Teams are judged on creativity, functionality and reflection of the client’s personality. On the day of the event, team members are challenged to work their makeover magic in just eight hours.

Depending on sponsorship, the HIC can serve nine-to-twelve clients each year. These clients must demonstrate commitment to making improvements in their lives. LifeWorks HIC has become an incentive for clients to follow through with their individual “service plans” which include short- and long-term goals. “The clients’ goals vary,” says Stephanie Bazan, a LifeWorks employee who is responsible for HIC event support, among other things. “Some clients are working on finishing school, some are working on finding employment and some are taking parenting classes.” Shares Bazan, “A lot of volunteers don’t realize what a jumpstart they are giving the client, until they see it for themselves.”

## Recipients

Hannah grew up in the midst of turmoil. Her parents separated shortly after Hannah was born and, when Hannah was just three-years-old, her father kidnapped her from her mother’s home. Hannah was returned to her mother when her father was forced to enter a rehabilitation facility for his drug and alcohol dependency. When he was released from treatment, her father attempted to kidnap his daughter once again, at knifepoint. This time, Hannah’s father was taken into police custody and admitted into a mental rehabilitation center. Life with her mother was no relief. Hannah’s mother abused her and, when Hannah was just 16, her mother threw her out of the house. With nowhere else to go, Hannah moved in with her father, who had been released from rehab. While in the care of her father, Hannah began using alcohol and drugs. At the age of 19, Hannah became pregnant and overcame



## Before

When Hannah moved into her apartment, she was grateful for the safety and stability it provided for her family. Even blank walls and bare mattresses were a marked improvement over sleeping in her car. Still, Hannah hoped for a better life for herself and her children.



## After

"It's a blessing that my kids and I didn't have before," said Hannah, when Kennady Company and Tim Cuppett Architects revealed the transformation of her home. Hannah's favorite gift was a laptop computer, which had been donated by a team member, along with paid enrollment in online college courses. "I want to go back to school so that I can make a better life for my kids. Now, I can."



## Before

Although the living space was hers, Kerria's apartment was sparsely furnished with items on loan from LifeWorks. Her job at a local supermarket paid her bills, but left nothing for "extras", like her own furnishings.



## After

"This is the best thing that's happened to me, ever," an elated Kerria said after her HIC reveal. Smiling through grateful tears, she added, "It's the best day of my whole life." When asked about her favorite gift, Kerria said, without the slightest hesitation, "The bus tickets to go see my brother."



her substance abuse in preparation for motherhood. When her infant son was just four-months-old, Hannah became homeless and for the two years that followed, she moved from one place to the next, spending many nights sleeping in her car with her baby. Hannah found help through LifeWorks Street Outreach and was referred to the Supportive Housing program. At the age of 21, only one month after moving into her new home, Hannah gave birth to her second child. With the help of LifeWorks, Hannah has enrolled in the WIA program, completed an internship and has established proper childcare for both her son and daughter.

Kerria was born to parents with drug addictions. By the tender age of seven, Kerria had endured years of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. She and her sister were removed from their mother's home and placed in the care of Child Protective Services. Kerria and her sister lived in six different foster homes and many shelters until they were separated. Kerria was placed in the custody of her step-grandfather, who also abused her physically, verbally and sexually. With nowhere else to turn, Kerria contacted her former foster mother who helped get Kerria out of the detrimental situation. Again, Kerria was moved through several foster homes before her case manager introduced her to LifeWorks when she was 18. Kerria lived in the LifeWorks emergency shelter and several boarding houses while she waited for more than a year to move into her first apartment in the Supportive Housing program. The support that Kerria has been given through LifeWorks has enabled her to enroll in the WIA program and complete a 3-month internship. Kerria is earning her GED and has participated in The Women's Empowerment Group, which is offered through LifeWorks' Counseling Program.

Stories like those of Kerria and Hannah are sadly common among the youth served by LifeWorks. "All of the young people we serve need connections to family or some kind of support system." Shares McDowell.

## Sponsors

Since the HIC began, NetSpend has been a major sponsor of the event. In fact, NetSpend is the provider of the \$1000 gift cards presented to

each team. For the 2003 HIC, NetSpend purchased vacuum cleaners for each apartment. Other corporate sponsors include American Campus Communities, Dell, Ernst & Young and Endeavor Real Estate Group. In addition to these large corporate sponsors, there are smaller groups whose impact is just as great. "We're not a big company, but we have some of the biggest hearts." says Sherie Artaza, co-founder of Project Suite Pea, a nonprofit group whose mission is to "use interior design to create beautiful and therapeutic living spaces for critically ill, injured, abused, neglected or emotionally distressed children who are in foster care, institutionalized or hospitalized." Artaza and Rachel Isaak founded Project Suite Pea in March of 2008. The self-described "stay-at-home moms" recognized the need for creating pleasant spaces for children coping with major life issues, and the HIC event was a perfect fit. With no corporate funding, Project Suite Pea depends on the donations and volunteer work of generous members of the community. "We're always looking for volunteers," says Artaza, "people who can give five-to-ten hours each week to support this work."

"People have been gracious and generous," says Vickie Dunlevy, owner of Kennady Company, Inc. Although this was the first year Dunlevy participated in the HIC, she is no stranger to donating time and money for worthy causes. "I have been to Honduras four times, doing building work for programs like Habitat for Humanity. Out of everything I have ever done, this project distracted me from my own problems the most." Shares Dunlevy, "I really wasn't in my head." Dunlevy's team sent out letters to friends, family, neighbors and clients, requesting donations for the project. Four Hands Home and IKEA donated furnishings. Dunlevy estimates that her team received at least \$8000 in donated time, effort and money.

The youngest sponsor this year was Hannah Windham. The charming 11-year-old found out about the HIC through a friend of her family who is a LifeWorks employee. Windham initiated a meeting with executives at LifeWorks, who agreed to help her set-up a website to assist in her fundraising effort. Windham also spread the word throughout her school and received donations from students, parents and faculty. Windham managed to raise over \$1000, which she used to purchase Bed Bath & Beyond gift cards for each recipient in the HIC.

## Designers

"In interior design, the two things you need to make things come together are time and money, and we had neither," says Jennifer Parker of Décor & You. Parker and her design team were also first-time participants in the HIC, and they are already committed to participate in next year's event. For Parker, this project held a special significance. "I became a mom at 16, and it would have meant a lot if someone had done something like this for me." Shares Parker, "This is a client who's décor means more to her than it would to anyone else." Décor & You was teamed up with NetSpend and together the team raised over \$15,000. "We called churches, various organizations and vendors." Says Parker, "We offered to advertise for our donors." Aside from the monetary gifts, Parker's vendors expedited shipping and paid for the shipping costs. "Items that would normally take four-to-eight weeks to arrive were sent in just days," says Parker. For the design, Parker's team brought style guides with them for their initial meeting with their recipient and asked the client to point out the colors and styles she preferred. By the end of the meeting, the style guides were full of bookmarks and a theme was beginning to emerge. The client asked that the design team work around a painting she had purchased in a thrift store, so the designers collaborated with a framer to have the painting framed and matted. The designers chose colors that worked harmoniously with the colors in the painting, but colors were just one of many concerns. "When we met Kerria, she told us that her bed was so uncomfortable that she usually slept on the floor with her blanket." Parker recalls. "At the reveal, when she sat on her new bed and put her face in her hands and said that nothing like this had ever happened to her before, it was beautiful."

The team gave Kerria more than a beautiful, welcoming home, they also gifted her with her own personal consultants who will assist her in her quest to find employment in an office setting, acting classes and bus tickets to College Station for the purpose of visiting her brother. All of the teams present their recipients with special "above and beyond" gifts, which can range from scholarships to laptop computers.

The designers of Décor & You were in good company this year. Designers from PPDS Design + Interior, Tim Cuppett Architects, >>>

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## Awards

In an event like the LifeWorks Home Improvement Challenge, there can only be winners. Each of the two-to-three-hundred volunteers is rewarded with the knowledge that they have made a positive difference in the lives of these recipients. Each recipient is gifted with the knowledge that people in their community care about them enough to donate time, hard work and money to improve their lives.

With that said, this year's Above and Beyond award was presented to Project Suite Pea, in light of the special

gift they presented to their recipient: a silver necklace with small, dangling pendants containing photographs of her two sons, so that they would always be near her heart.

The Bold and Beautiful award was presented to Kennedy Company, Inc. and Tim Cuppitt Architects in honor of the care they took to ensure that every piece of furniture could be easily moved and rearranged when their recipient relocates in December of this year.

This year's Most Extreme Makeover award was presented to NetSpend and Décor & You in recognition of the major transformation they achieved in their recipient's home and the thoughtful details that reflected the client's unique personality.

Though the 2008 HIC event is now over, McDowell knows that the impact of this event lasts long after the reveal. "Twenty years from now, these clients will not look back at the material things; they will remember the people who cared and supported them." ★

## MORE INFO

Lifeworks  
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