

An 'angel' finds help to repair an Indian River County man's home

Gene Perna's home was damaged in 2004 hurricanes and he has been living in a trailer

By Henry A. Stephens (Contact)
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Photo by Sarah Grile

SARAH GRILE • sarah.grile@scripps.com VERO BEACH - Teddy Floyd, a deputy with the Indian River County Sheriff's Office, shares a moment with Gene Perna, of Vero Beach, on Wednesday in front of his home. Perna, who has been living in a FEMA trailer in his driveway since the 2004 hurricanes, has finally been able to find help to repair his home and fix the drainage problem in his yard. Perna's wife said that Deputy Floyd, who helps head the organization Every Dream Has a Price, Inc. with Julianne Price, is the "funniest looking angel I've ever seen." photo taken on June 19, 2008



Photo by Sarah Grile

SARAH GRILE • sarah.grile@scripps.com not finished VERO BEACH - Gene Perna, of Vero Beach, holds a picture taken of his yard to show the flooding while at his home on Wednesday. photo taken on June 19, 2008

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Flora Lane resident Gene Perna has been living in a travel trailer in his driveway ever since his house was flooded before the 2004 hurricanes.

But he may soon be able to move back into his house, thanks to the same people who helped improve West Wabasso, rebuild some Fellsmere homes and repair some in Gifford.

"One work day on a Saturday, with 25 volunteers repairing his house, is worth it to get him out of his travel trailer," said county Environmental Health Specialist Julianne Price, president of Every Dream Has a Price Inc.

Perna, 70, said he only makes what he gets from Social Security and can't afford his own repairs.

Joe Telese, vice president of Regata Construction, said he would be leading the repair effort on July 26. He said he still needs to look over the inside of Perna's house to see how much drywall, screens and other features need to be replaced.

"He has a lot of stuff piled up so it's really difficult to see the walls," Telese said.

For that reason, Perna now has a pair of bins on his front yard for sorting trash from mementos after 30 years on Flora Lane, a private unpaved road on the south side of State Road 60, across from the Indian River Mall. Telese said he has asked Perna to clean the house out before it could be repaired.

"I don't know why I've been keeping some of this stuff," Perna said.

He said Buddy Akins, county building official, referred him to Price's group as county officials sought to get the trailer removed.

Price said Louise Hubbard, executive director of the Treasure Coast Homeless Services Council, offered to help improve the neighborhood drainage to make the project possible.

"Gene's stuck between a rock and a hard place if I ever saw one," Hubbard said.

The county Code Enforcement Board recently extended Perna's deadline from June to August to get the trailer off his property. The neighborhood isn't zoned for mobile homes, said Roland DeBlois, code enforcement chief .

DeBlois said he agreed to the extension after Price said she could get volunteers to repair the flood damage to Perna's house and allow him to move back in.

"In 2004 we had the hurricanes, but it's 2008 and he still lives in that RV and hasn't repaired his home," DeBlois said. "Our position is this should have been addressed by now."

Much easier said than done, Perna said. Repairing the house before now was pointless, he said, because of drainage problems. It would have been flood-damaged again with the next big rain.

"While everybody wanted to do something about the house, nobody wanted to do anything about the drainage," Perna said.

County officials said they couldn't use tax money to retrofit swales along the road because it is private.

In February 2007, Perna sued Alan Kehrer, who owns the home to his north, arguing that Kehrer's driveway, built in 2001, was an "unreasonable obstruction" to the drainage. But County Judge David Morgan ruled for Kehrer on April 23, saying the drainage was a neighborhood problem that wasn't caused by one driveway.

The road used to drain the area into a canal on S.R. 60. But residents, who own land to the middle of Flora Lane, would fill ruts and holes after rains over the decades, in time raising the road level to where it now drains on their lots, county engineers say.

Sebastian developer Joe Paladin in 2005 offered to help local contractors improve the drainage, but said they took on other jobs in the year it took him to get all of Flora Lane residents to sign waivers allowing the work.

Hubbard said she used a \$10,000 grant from Lutheran Services to get Alan Dale Land Clearing of Vero Beach to dig a swale along the east side of Flora Lane from Perna's house north to the S.R. 60 canal. Perna said he got to see the swale work after a recent rain.

He said he stood on his yard with an umbrella, watching that water go down the ditch after years of seeing it back up to his house.

"I'm glad to see him smiling," sheriff's Deputy Teddy Floyd said on a recent visit. "It's been a long time since we've seen him smiling."