



3,000 housed in building blitz 2008

BILL CORCORAN
in Cape Town

MORE THAN 3,000 of South Africa's poorest residents swapped decrepit shacks for brick houses yesterday, courtesy of Irish volunteers involved in this year's charity building blitz in Khayelitsha township near Cape Town.

Despite a blistering sun, the 2,000 volunteers who toiled to help the Niall Mellon Township Trust (NMTT) achieve its goal managed to sustain the pace and build 250 free houses for impoverished people in a week.

Scenes of joy erupted across the informal settlement throughout yesterday as people who have waited 25 years in some cases for new homes received their early Christmas present.

Among those who took part in this year's blitz were 50 Irish bankers, developer Sean Dunne, model Glenda Gilson and celebrity gardener Diarmuid Gavin, as well as a group of chiefs of staff from the US Congressional Black Caucus. NMTT worldwide chief executive Paddy Maguinness said while everyone's presence was applauded, the Americans' attendance was an important development in terms of securing future funding.

The charity has built nearly 10,000 houses since 2002, but it hopes to build 10,000 a year from 2010 as part of its drive to help the South African government meet its current housing shortfall of two million homes.

"We are working to get the US government behind our programme and we hope to secure funding through USAID from next year. We are also very hopeful someone from president-elect Barack Obama's camp will soon be on board," Mr Maguinness told *The Irish Times*.

According to trust founder Niall Mellon, the Irish volunteers have inspired visits and support from numerous quarters this week due to the size of the contingent taking part this year, and the compelling stories many volunteers told regarding their fundraising.

"Whether it was the Heads of Housing from Johannesburg, the regional African director of the

World Bank, the eight senior staff members from Congress in Washington, or South Africa's Desmond Tutu, they came from everywhere.

"Many at the highest levels paid tribute and offered future support to the charity. I hope this trip will inspire everyone in low-cost housing in South Africa that working together, we can solve the housing crisis," he said.

One of the most poignant moments of the week occurred when Co Mayo man Sean O'Connell fulfilled a promise he made to himself a year ago after the death of his wife Ann Marie, who succumbed to cancer after a three-year battle.

Mr O'Connell raised €27,000 for the building blitz as a way to take something positive from the year following his wife's death.

To mark the occasion he buried a time capsule containing memorabilia of his wife beneath a freshly planted tree in a new garden built for the residents of Khayelitsha, in a small, moving ceremony. "This has been a great way to find a positive outcome from a difficult time. But in years to come I can tell my children that even though they lost their Mum, another family has gained a house and a lifetime of opportunity," he concluded.

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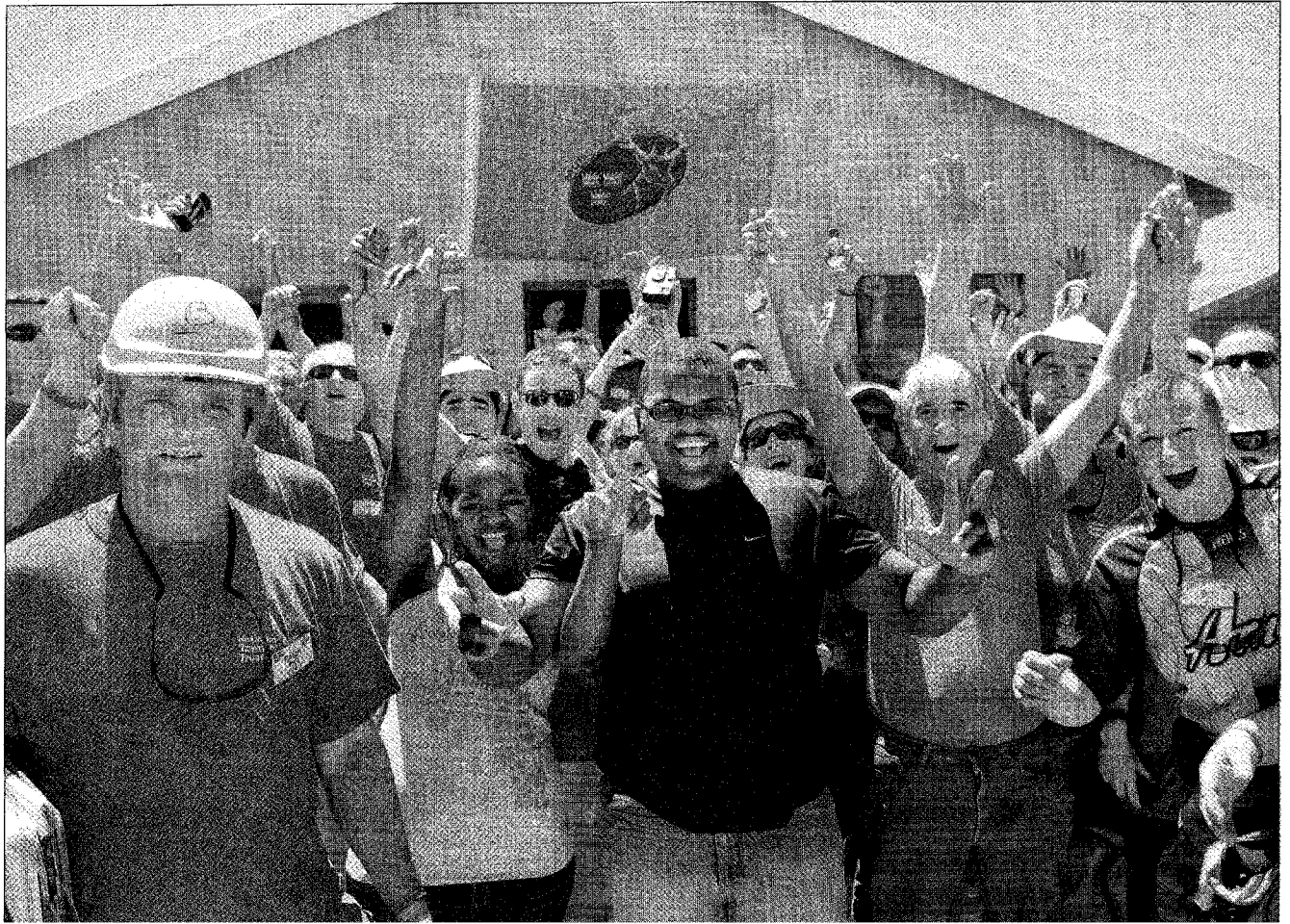
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Irish volunteers celebrate yesterday with new South African homeowners Cebisa (right) and Thulani Vanqa in the Khayelitsha township near Cape Town during the Niall Mellon Township Trust building blitz 2008. The event, lasting a week, saw 250 houses being built by the volunteers.