



OBAMA BACKS HERO BUILDER'S PROJECT

Mellon Trust in line for aid from US

■ By EMILY MILLER

TEARFUL Irish charity chief Niall Mellon yesterday thanked US President Barack Obama for passing legislation that could inject thousands of euro into his African housing project.

The construction boss spoke for the first time of his joy after being recommended for USAID development fund cash as his army of Irish builders have put up 11,000 houses for homeless people in South Africa.

Newly-elected Obama personally backed the project in one of his first moves after taking office at the White House last January.

And yesterday, Niall said the extra money would transform many more lives, as he handed a family of seven the keys to their new home.

Incredible

Niall (42) said: "This is a historic moment. It's hard to believe we've come this far.

"To think that there is now a paragraph in US law that says 'the Niall Mellon Township Trust should be considered for funding' is just incredible.

"I have to thank President Obama's senate from the bottom of my heart for including us in the Appropriations Bill," said Niall.

"I always watched Barack Obama with great hope and am very grateful that his administration is making a difference so soon after being voted to power.

He added: "This sort of move is what the American spirit is all about."

Hero Niall, a Dublin dad-of-three, also received praise from one of Obama's top diplomats for his "tremendous achievements".

US Consul General to South Africa Alberta Mayberry said: "The director for USAID has seen this for herself and it's my highest hope that they

'blitz week' working with Niall's team to build 75 homes in the baking African heat.

And yesterday, the grateful Olifant family was the first to step inside.

The clan, who survive on less than €4 a day, spent their entire lives in squalid shacks.

But now shop worker Thembaethu (20) and his sisters, Ndileka (32) and Weziwe (31), can keep their children safe, warm and clean.

They wept as they entered the two-bedroom home in Mbekweni, west of Cape Town.

Weziwe beamed as she explored her new rooms with daughters Siphokazi (14) Mhlahli (6) and son Lutho (5).

"We will be so happy. We could never dream of a home like this," she said.

Siphokazi added: "The first thing I will do is wash in the shower."

Painted green, the simple concrete building has a bathroom, kitchen and living area.

Shell

Last week it was just a shell, but thanks to Niall and his volunteers, it is now ready to house them.

Ndileka, who has daughter Lihle (8) and one-year-old son Endinako, said: "I'm so excited. It's a very big day for us. Thank you to all the Irish people. They have changed things for us."

Generous Mary O'Connor (54) spent her birthday on the building site yesterday.

The HR officer from Currow, Co Kerry, said: "It was the best birthday ever. The team work is fantastic, I've made so many friends — and it's great to see what can be accomplished when people pull together."

Volunteers interested in helping need to raise €5,000 each to cover flights from Ireland to South Africa and a personal contribution.

will donate to Niall Mellon."

More than 500 Irish volunteers are currently on a

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