

By the end of the week 500 shack dwellers lives in the township of Witsand, near Cape Town were utterly changed.

It's Bantry man John McCarthy's fifth time on the Niall Mellon Township Trust Blitz. This year the township is Witsand and he's brought along his two daughters, 19 year old Cornelia and 24 year old Rebecca as company for a second year running.

Five years ago he brought his two sons for two years running and the only member of the family that has held out so far is his wife Mary. She is head fundraiser and in charge of church collections, bingo, bucket collections and coffee mornings. A few weeks before the trip he was talked into shaving off his moustache of 31 years. He misses it but it earned €400 so he's learned to let go.

2011 has been good to the beef farmer although he laughs when he mentions that despite this farming is a poor man's hobby. But the word poor in Ireland and in South Africa means totally different things. In Ireland mostly it's queuing for assistance payments and vouchers,



John McCarthy

his children on township building blitzes will live on in his memory, the bonds and friendships formed over the years will last a lifetime and the sense of fulfilment makes every ache, pain, bruise and blister worth it.

For 65 year old Padraig Nolan it's his eighth building blitz. The suckler and sheep farmer from outside Roscommon town was one of the 150 volunteers on the very first blitz in Imizamo Yethu in 2003. He responded to an advert because he had spent three weeks in Cape Town earlier that year with his wife and daughter who was studying sociology there.

On the last day of his holiday he booked himself on a shack tour and left feeling sad and nauseated. He swore to himself there and then that if he was ever presented with the opportunity to do something to effect a change in these people's lives he would act on it. When he heard the radio advert a few months later he instantly signed up.

Padraig has missed the last two blitzes and was so gutted that he ended up phoning his team mates on site. 2011 has been a terrific

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its downsizing, spending less and managing the household energy spend. In South Africa it means a husband, wife and their three children living in a wooden box with interior cardboard walls and a tin roof if they are lucky. The particular house John visited this year had no electricity, no water and no toilet. It didn't even have a bed. The effect that the shack and crèche visits have on John ensures he returns year in and out. He takes home a great sense of satisfaction that he and his children have made a real difference to the life of an African family.

He can rest easy flying home knowing that families can educate their young and prosper in a safe and secure environment. He also knows the experience has positively affected his children over the years. "They have returned to Ireland with a greater level of maturity and seem more grounded," he says.

He smiles when he speaks about working with his two daughters on this trip. He enjoys the craic with them and is proud watching the girls get stuck in on site, pushing wheelbarrows and block laying.

Rebecca who has swapped her job as a pharmacist for labouring along with micro-biology student Cornelia admit that the first year however their mother sent them to mind their dad. The buzz on site, the laughter and seeing the results of their work has brought them back and it's enjoyable working with their dad.

The time John has spent with

Farmers John McCarthy and Padraig Nolan joined 600 volunteers on this year's Niall Mellon Township Trust Building Blitz.



John with his two daughters Rebecca and Cornelia



Padraig Nolan

year for sheep and cattle farming, although in a fluctuating market two good years could mean three bad years are to follow but Padraig is content with his lot and overwhelmed to be back on site amongst his old and new team-mates.

He maintains that there are three rules to prepare for a township blitz:

1. You will find yourself surrounded by strangers from all walks of life.
2. 60% to 70% of those on a blitz have never been on a building site before.
3. You can look at the plight of the townships on tv until you are blue in the face but until your senses are engaged you can't even begin to imagine the poverty and pain.

From that first year in Imizamo Yethu he remembers building houses in between shacks and actually having to displace two or three families in order to build one house. Later he learned that the families would sublet the rooms to those displaced families. He remembers the problems, working with little or no machinery and only large mixers but everyone was so enthusiastic no problem was too great and nine years later, the tools and machinery are better, the organisation and support is supreme and everyone agrees on site, no matter what's going on, nothing is a problem.

This was the charity's tenth blitz and by the end of this year, 100,000 people will have been housed. **CL**