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Harper family enjoys their 'Extreme Home'

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By Aisha I. Jefferson

The Harper family may have settled into the reality of living the American Dream, but watching themselves on ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" Sunday was sort of surreal.

A multitude of "oohs," "aahs" and laughs exploded throughout the evening as the Harper family of Lake City watched their old home demolished and the unveiling of their new dream home thanks to the TV show.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would be sitting on the other side," an emotional Patricia Harper said about watching the show in her family's new home. The Harper family applied last year to be on the show.

More than 40 family members, friends and Lake City residents, including Mayor Willie Oswalt and his wife Lawanda, assembled before the new Hitachi Plasma television in the Harper family room to watch the "Extreme Makeover" episode with them.

Even a couple of Lake City police officers stopped in to share the Harper's joy.

"Probably the last time we saw people like this was at my Aunt Joyce's funeral," said the oldest Harper son, Tammell, 24, who held his 11 month old daughter Tatiyana.

"I think it's beautiful; words can't describe it," Milton Harper said, watching himself on TV and wiping tears from his eyes with a balled-up tissue.

The prayers of Patricia and Milton Harper, along with their three sons, Darius, LaVaughn and Mister, ranging in ages 8 to 17, were answered Jan. 23, when they returned to find the home of their dreams: a 5,300 square-foot, five-bedroom, seven-bath English Country-style home, in place of their old one.

The family also received a black 2005 Ford 500, and \$100,000 for the home's maintenance and upkeep as part of the surprise.

The Harpers' new home is the biggest home the "Extreme Makeover" crew ever attempted to build.

The Harpers moved to Lake City from a New York public housing project and spent their life savings trying to repair the house they purchased in 1999 on Ahyoka Drive in Lake City. The family experienced problems with a septic tank that backed up into the house each time it rained, forcing them to sleep in a van in the driveway. The construction project began Jan. 17 when the septic tank was emptied and the utilities were shut off. Asbestos and other illness-inducing germs were discovered in the home during pre-demolition work.

A crew of more than 200 people tore down the old home and built the new one in less than six days, while the family vacationed in California's Disney Land.

Beazer Homes, the sixth-largest home builder in the nation, oversaw the home's construction.

All of the bedrooms were decorated to suit the tastes of its inhabitants, such as Mister's cardiologist-themed room or Darius' room, which has a photographed mural of the Brooklyn Bridge, paying homage to his native New York.

The Harpers currently operate Mister Protection, a family-owned home security system company, which is based in their new home.

Although Patricia Harper loves every inch of her new home, she does have her favorite feature.

"I think the 200-year-old wood beams, those are priceless," she said looking up at the family room ceiling.

Patricia Harper said she wanted to thank Beazer Homes, Clayton County, Oswalt, "Extreme Makeover" and ABC "for changing our lives."

"We could never say enough 'thank you's' for the gifts they have given to us," she said.