



# A TRUE LABOR OF LOVE

By Toni Garrard Clay

Volunteers removed a family's front steps this past summer and replaced it with a porch featuring a 24-foot wheelchair ramp.

**If there's an organization** more aptly named than Labor of Love, one would be hard pressed to find it. The men (and one woman) who make up this organization most certainly labor, and they do it out of love for community.

Athens Samaritan's Labor of Love provides home repairs — at no charge to homeowners — to Henderson County residents who cannot maintain their property due to age, disability or other circumstances beyond their control. Formed in 1986, the volunteer organization operated for years with a fairly small core group. Two or three times a year, a work day was held to handle as many jobs as possible.

"The total would be 12 to 20 jobs a year," said Gary Chasey, the organization's vice president. "We reorganized several years ago and brought in more people. We helped 173 families in 2012 with probably close to that many in 2013." (At press time, final figures for 2013 were not available.)

Chasey's wife, Sharon, is Labor of Love's only part-time employee. She handles the bookkeeping, telephoning and written correspondence with applicants. Applications flow in from several sources, such as through the HELP Center, church and civic organizations, and home healthcare workers.

"When they call, we send an application which is returned and screened for qualifications. If they qualify, then we visit for a home assessment. The objective

is to see what their needs really are and what we feel we can assist them with," said Chasey. "If we accept the job, a job sheet is created."

Once a month, the group's 10 project mangers meet and divide between them the jobs that have come in during the previous 30 days. Those men will then visit their assigned sites to determine the size of crew needed, number of work days required and order the needed materials. "Our goal is to have jobs completed in 30 to 45 days, because we're going to have another load come in the next month," said Chasey.

In addition to the 10 project managers, a group of about 43 men are committed to working on the teams. They do all the work themselves — with the exception of roofing, plumbing, electrical, foundation and AC/heating. In those cases they hire professionals. Work runs year-round, though not on weekends, which necessitates that most volunteers are retirees.

"There are so many different volunteer organizations out there, but this one is particularly appealing to a lot of men," said Labor of Love President Roy Talbot. "What we do helps people live independent lives. It helps them get in and out of the house. Our focus is on health and safety issues."

Gale Price has seen Labor of Love volunteers on the job. She cares for her 84-year-old father, and it was





becoming increasingly difficult with a damaged floor in front of the door and a very steep access ramp to get him in and out of the house.

"I just couldn't do it anymore," said Price. A family member told her about the organization this past fall, and she applied for assistance. A week after applying, volunteers came out to make a site assessment. Then a few days later, they started the work.

"When I contacted them, they were so positive," said Price. "They told us they weren't professionals, but they help people out of love for the community. They seem like good Christian people who want to help. They made me feel comfortable. ... It's been a blessing."

According to Talbot, volunteers logged 4,614 hours working on projects in 2012, with about the same number of hours expected to be tallied for 2013.

"We care, and we show it in a very hands-on way," said Talbot. "I can remember the daughter of a woman we put in a wheelchair ramp for. We also fixed some windows and did several things. At the end of it, the daughter lined up each one of us and gave us a giant hug, one at a time."

Talbot said the organization spends about \$130,000 to \$140,000 a year. Funding for Labor of Love comes from several sources such as the Henderson County United Way, the Cain and Murchison foundations, area churches, some banks and people in the community.

"We are always looking for volunteers," said Chasey. "If someone feels as though they have an interest in this area, we'd love to make them a part of the organization."

**To reach Labor of Love about volunteering or to receive an application, call 903-675-LOVE (5683). To make a donation, checks may be mailed to Labor of Love, PO Box 350, Athens, TX 75751.**



Ramps like the one shown are typical Labor of Love projects.

