

Typical Winter
This winter should be
Less snowy and cold
Than last years, an
AccuWeather fore-
Caster says | **B2**

METRO & STATE

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City and builders pitch in to aid family after kitchen fire

Thursday is a kitchen kind of holiday, so Carla Hopkins would love to gather her four kids around a table to pinch pie crusts and stuff a turkey.

In her mind, the birds is browning. In reality, what's cooked is her kitchen.

"My son Bill phoned me at work and said, 'Mom., the cabinets are on fire.' I was frantic for him to get out of the house."

Carla, then a distribution-center supervisor, raced home.

Her husband, Willie Hopkins Jr., a COTA bus driver, has seen fire engines racing down his S. James Road route. But not until a supervisor met him at a stop on Sept. 27 last year did he realize it was his house that had burned, because a kitchen grease fire.

By the time both parents arrived, the firefighters were dousing the flames and chopping out the kitchen ceiling to look for embers.

"I fell to my knees. I couldn't believe how much damage was done," Mrs. Hopkins said.

Her husband was optimistic. He thought he could do the repairs himself.

Billy, 19; Brittany, 16; Klara, 12; and Cameron, 11, were safe. Everything else, the Hopkin's figured, could be fixed.

They never imagined that the foundation of the East Side house was on the verge of collapse.

Or that a bank, since closed, had failed to release a loan after the Hopkins had paid off their mortgage. No bank would touch a new loan.

Community groups promised to help - "next week, next week" - then backed out.



**BARBARA
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Willie and Carla Hopkins of Columbus stand in their kitchen, which was destroyed by a grease fire last year.

And to make things worse, the Hopkinses were between insurance policies. The company had cancelled their policy after wind damage prompted a claim for roof repairs.

As the holidays approached, the Hopkinses are not worried about how big a turkey to make. They dream of a warm kitchen and a home-cooked dinner on the table.

It's too late for Thanksgiving; a bank loan was delayed so the basement could be repaired to secure a good appraisal. But Christmas is looking like a possibility.

Plastic sheeting, held up by duct tape, will come down next week. For real. No more microwave cooking in the living room, no more washing dishes in the bathroom sink.

The Columbus Development Department, hearing of the Hopkinses' plight, took up their case at a Neighborhood Pride brainstorming session.

"We really wanted to help. This family had a good attitude. And they were so grateful," said Dan Kaiser, a city rehabilitation technician.

The city offered the Hopkinses a \$20,000, no-interest, forgivable loan. But the foundation problem quickly doubled the cost of the work.

Columbus was in over its budget.

Kim Stands, the housing program's coordinator, kept shoving aside a recommendation on his desk to drop the Hopkinses.

"There must be a way," he said. He said it again at a Neighborhood Pride Center.

Someone mentioned NARI, the central Ohio chapter of the Remodeling Industry.

"We wanted to volunteer on a project that wouldn't happen without our help," director Shari Bates said.

They'd found one.

J&D Basements fixed the foundation this month at a discount. The city loan covered that bill.

Ameribanc Mortgage came through last week with a loan for construction materials.

And labor will be free, courtesy of other NARI members: Dave Fox Remodeling, Countryside Electric, Frontier Home Remodeling, Lowe's, Mobley's Custom Drywall, Newlook Sidings, Regency Wallcraft, Thompson Building Associates, White House Remodelers and Wingler & Sons Construction.

"I've gone from hearing 'Next week, next week' to saying, 'Thank you, thank you,'" a jubilant Carla Hopkins said.

Family members need to find a place to stay during the work, but they should be home for Christmas.

For the Hopkinses, Santa is real. He works for the city and wears a tool belt.

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