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Building community

Summary: UMM students are doing more than just hitting the books this fall - they are giving back to the community. The work of Matt Harren, Eagle Bend, and Shawn Olson, Thief River Falls, has impressed others who work with the Stevens County Chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

(November 14, 2006)-University of Minnesota, Morris students are doing more than just hitting the books this fall – they are giving back to the community. The work of Matt Harren, Eagle Bend, and Shawn Olson, Thief River Falls, has impressed others who work with the Stevens County Chapter of Habitat for Humanity. "If it wasn't for those young men we wouldn't have a roof on the house," explained Bill Ritson the chairman of the Construction Committee for the Stevens County Chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

Harren and Olson's passion for building began in spring 2006 when they went to Taos, New Mexico, with the Habitat for Humanity Club at UMM. They spent their spring break in the mountains of Taos constructing an adobe style home. Their experience in Taos made them, "believe in Habitat and what it does for families," said Olson. They were both elected later that spring to be president and vice president, respectively, of the UMM organization and since then have become an asset to the Stevens County Chapter. "It gets the community involved in and aware of a need for housing in Morris and the Alberta areas," explained Harren. The Stevens County Chapter is building its first home in Alberta for a single family with two children. Weather permitting, the home is scheduled for completion by early 2007.

Harren and Olson began attending the Stevens County monthly meetings at the start of the 2006 school year and now are part of the handful of skilled volunteers, including two other UMM students, Nate Wood and Steven Harren, Eagle Bend, who are actively building the home. They spent an entire Sunday shingling the roof.

Harren and Olson are both from working farms and have some formal construction experience and felt that they should put their talents to use. The students have volunteered many hours for Habitat for Humanity, hours that Olson said were worth it, "I really like doing construction and helping out. It's really rewarding."

This project is part of Adapting to Change: Managing Urbanization in Rural America, a partnership for community revitalization between the city of Morris, and the University of Minnesota Morris. The partnership focuses on three priority areas: housing, economic development, and community organization and neighborhood revitalization and is funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Outreach Partnership Centers Program.

For more information about the grant and the COPC - Adapting to Change partnership activities, contact the Center for Small Towns at (320) 589-6451, or visit: www.centerforsmalltowns.org

Photo: Habitat for Humanity house near Alberta

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