



PHOTOS BY GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

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THE DISTRICT

College students building a house with a purpose

By April Burbank
Special to the Washington Examiner

Kyle Noell looks forward to the day when he will hand the keys of a solar-powered house to a wounded U.S. military veteran — with dozens of D.C. college students' signatures on a steel beam that's part of building's foundation.

The one-bedroom house, which is now just a skeleton on the campus of the Catholic University of America, is an entry in the U.S. Department of Energy's Solar Decathlon. The competition is in Irvine, Calif., in October, and the house will be trucked there this summer. Afterward, it will become someone's home.

"We have an actual end client in mind," said Noell, a graduate student studying architecture at Catholic University. "This home isn't just going to be a display home for somebody."

At the house on a recent afternoon, Noell pointed out how wheelchair-accessible floor plan and appliances, such as a drawer-style dishwasher, would make everyday tasks a little easier for a disabled veteran. And even without the solar-thermal technology installed, the house's low environmental impact was already built in.

"All of the 2-by-4s that you see are all reclaimed," he said, gesturing toward the wood framing, some of which had been left over from construction at a D.C. museum.

Noell and about 100 other students from three D.C. universities are working on the house, which they call Harvest Home.

This is the first time D.C. will send college students to participate in the Solar Decathlon, a biannual competition that requires students to build a solar-powered home that will be judged on affordability, market appeal, energy use and other factors.

"Getting to the competition on time with a house that works is

the biggest challenge," said Mike Binder, an architect who worked with University of Maryland students in previous Solar Decathlon competitions. "The key is, don't get distracted, don't try to make it perfect."

The competition does not require students to build the house for a specific homeowner, but Noell said they were motivated to design it for a wounded veteran because they noticed a lack of housing for veterans.

D.C.'s team formed around the strengths of the three universities involved: Catholic University is focusing on architecture, American University is leading communications, and George Washington University is working on landscape architecture and interior design.

"I think the students that have stepped up have done incredible things," said William Jelen, an architect and faculty member at Catholic University who serves as the project coordinator. "The students that have gone from second-year graduate students to being the point person for coordinating all of the mechanical and electrical systems in the building ... There's no course that can prepare you for that."

Funding and logistical support for the project has come from a Energy Department grant, the universities and local experts. The target cost for the building of the home is \$300,000.

The team has been working on the project for more than two years, and more students are joining now that construction has started — many of whom had never built anything like it before.

"The competition in October is kind of like the icing on the cake," said Lauren Wingo, a George Washington University graduate student studying structural engineering. "I feel like we've already accomplished so much."



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