



# EXTREME *Purdys Edition* MAKEOVER:

The inside story of how ABC's hit show, some dedicated builders, and all of Northern Westchester banded together to give the grief-stricken Arena family a new home.

By Ted Mann  
Photographs by Mark Vergari

Let's clear up one myth right away. On ABC's hit *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the homes are not, in fact, built in seven days—as is the show's Book of Genesis-like claim. From demolition to furniture move-in, it's much closer to five days.

This much I learned last April, when the show descended upon Northern Westchester. My involvement began with a cryptic phone call from a Katonah resident named Michael Balkind, a sales manager for basement-finishing systems and my *Extreme Makeover* Deep Throat. His company, Alure Remodeling (based in Briarcliff Manor), had already done four of the show's tear-downs and

rebuilt—including one only two weeks ago in Queens. Another, he said, was being planned nearby, but to learn more, I'd need to show up at the Somers firehouse on a Tuesday night. Like Woodward's Watergate leak, though, he gave no more specifics and no names.

But then, he didn't need to. After months of community lobbying, it was widely known that the Arena family of Lake Purdys was an *Extreme Makeover* frontrunner. Last September, the parents, Gina and James Arena, lost their only son, Jimmy Jr., to an inoperable brain tumor. Known as Jimboy to friends and neighbors, the 6-year-old's ordeal touched the lives of thousands



of residents, who organized blood drives, fund-raisers, and even a fire engine parade in his honor. To make matters worse for the Arena family, all of their savings went toward fighting Jimboy's cancer, and there was no money left for necessary repairs to their cramped, crumbling home.

The family of eight shared a two-bedroom, one-bath ramshackle house—and Gina had just announced that she was pregnant with another child, a boy, due in July. The arithmetic just didn't work: eight people, almost all women, using one bathroom. For the *Extreme Makeover* execs, choosing this family was a no-brainer.

Personal drama aside, I was drawn to the Somers firehouse out of selfish curiosity. I'd seen the show's designers paint and decorate and take credit on television, but I wanted to understand who actually built the *Extreme* homes. By keeping a diary of the week, I planned to shed some reality on the so-called reality-TV show. And perhaps just once I would watch the "Move that bus!" scene and not break down into a blubbering crybaby.

## Tuesday: Kickoff Meeting

Seth Selesnow, Alure's marketing director, conspires with Balkind to let me watch the top-secret kickoff meeting—provided I don't tell anyone I'm a journalist. The Arena family won't learn about their good fortune until Pennington breaks out the bullhorn tomorrow morning, but for now ABC is closely guarding the secret. The only ones in the know tonight are the 50 men (and one woman) seated at long folding tables in the Somers firehouse. Wearing jeans, T-shirts, and BlackBerries, they're here to hash out building plans. And the one in charge is Alure's president, Sal Ferro.

A compact man with a dimpled chin, dark tan, and jet-black hair, the 42-year-old Ferro has a Sylvester Stallone, movie-star presence. He launches into the Arenas' emotional story and shows videos of the parents and Jimboy. This rough-cut video doesn't yet have ABC's polish; it's still just a home movie made by neighbor Steve Bierman. And it's enough to make a room full of beefy contractors, including Ferro, well up.



Finally, Ferro introduces the key players: Doug Caldwell, the gray-goateed second in command; Adam Helfman, ABC's construction liaison; and Kathy Cline, head of Alure's first *Extreme Makeover* building partner, a Rockland-based company called Helmer-Cronin. They're not in it for the publicity, Ferro says. "I'll be on TV for about 36 seconds. The show is about the illusion of Ty Pennington and the designers building this house." Still, there's no illusion about who's in charge of construction. "If Ty comes and asks you to make changes, say no," commands Caldwell. "Then come and get Sal, Kathy, or me. You can't give them an inch."

The rules of the work site are simple: Everyone must sign a waiver; to get near the house, you must wear a blue *Extreme Makeover* shirt and white helmet; and, after a lot of thefts at the Queens house, guard your tools. Caldwell loads a Power-

Point slide posing a question, "How will we get this done?" Very simple, he explains, unfurling a massive, two-page, ledger-size, five-day timeline as if it's the Ten Commandments. To ensure efficiency, tasks overlap one another like toppled dominos. As everyone soaks up the dizzying list of to-dos, a painter peers at the microscopically small fonts and jokes, "Wait, so we have to work Saturday and Sunday, too?"

## Friday: Braveheart

When I arrive at 7 a.m., all of Lake Purdys has been turned into a virtual soundstage. A quaint neighborhood of modest-sized homes and narrow roads—all of which end in "Way" (Cross Way, Eastern Way)—it's completely shut down to through traffic. The Arenas' modest ranch on Buena Way has been stripped of everything except its weathered wood siding. Pollen dust twinkles through the Friday sun as





LEFT: ALURE PRESIDENT SAL FERRO LEADS HIS FIFTH EXTREME MAKEOVER, AND SPEAKS TO WORKERS THROUGH A LAPEL MIC. ABOVE: DEMOLITION OF THE OLD ARENA HOME WAS SPEEDY, THANKS TO HUNDREDS OF LOCAL FIREFIGHTERS.

I admire the most attractive part of the preconstruction property, a flowering pink cherry-blossom tree. It will be the only extant feature that remains after the makeover is finished next Wednesday.

Ferro sits inside a sleeper trailer on Alden Way. He's having a quiet, reflective moment and rehearsing his on-camera speech to the troops. "I have a 5-year-old daughter, almost the same age as Jimboy," he tells me, explaining why he agreed to do back-to-back makeovers. "How could I not empathize?" He starts sniffing, blaming his allergies.

The goal of "Braveheart," today's scene, is to film an army of volunteers charging toward the house. In addition to the innumerable contractors, every firefighter in Northern Westchester appears to be on hand. It's an unusually hot spring day, and they're wearing heavy coats with "Katonah" and "Croton Falls" in big block letters and carrying crowbars and chainsaws.

On cue, we charge down the street like an angry mob, pumping our fists and roaring. When we reach a bend in the road, a producer holds up his hands and says into a megaphone, "That was great. Now we're going to do it all over again." We exhale a massive, 200-person groan, and everyone—the plaster-splattered contractors, the sweating firefighters, the six full-size fire trucks—moves in reverse for take two.

When our Braveheart army finally makes it to the Arena home's driveway, Ty attempts to do a video-diary segment. He keeps tripping over his words, repeating his lines, mumbling, "What the hell am I talking about?" Sal, however, nails his speech, in effect upstaging the *Trading Spaces* veteran.

Finally, hundreds of firefighters begin demolition. And boy, do they know how to "demo." Axes and sledgehammers quickly turn the house into a cacophonous storm of sawdust and flying shingles. They only break when Gina Arena's father hops into a bulldozer to crush the final remains.

### Saturday: Tale of the Time Lapse

Perched in a tree across the street from the former Arena home is one of the show's secret weapons: a miniature camera, hoisted 20 feet overhead, that captures the key time-lapse shot. On TV, its clip goes by in a flash, no longer than a bathroom break. But in those 30 seconds—tucked between designer shenanigans and trips to Sears—you're actually witnessing the vast bulk of the actual makeover.

If you slow down the Arenas' time lapse, you'll see something else conspicuously absent from the final program: rain. Lots of rain. The downpour persists for four days straight. Aside from a shot of Ferro in a yellow slicker, however, none of Alure's waterworld heroism makes it to the broadcast. Instead, you see sunny shots of Pennington and the designers, filmed before and after the build.

## extreme contractors

Dozens of local contractors, builders, and businesses volunteered their services for the Arena family's *Extreme Makeover*—and, from architectural plans to carpentry to landscape design, they help you makeover your home, too.

➤ **Head Builder:** Alure Home Improvements; 541 N. State Rd.; Briarcliff Manor; 800-639-7666; [alure.com](http://alure.com).

➤ **Co-Builder:** Helmer-Cronin Construction, Inc.; 27 Rte. 210; Stony Point; 845-942-1330; [helmercronin.com](http://helmercronin.com).

➤ **Landscape Design:** Tom Dieck; TRD Designs, Ltd.; 44 Allison Rd.; Katonah; 232-4767; [trddesign.com](http://trddesign.com).

➤ **Landscaping:** Tommy Alfredo; Alfredo LDC; Armonk; 666-3950.

➤ **Architectural Plans:** Tim Wetmore; 14 Guyer Rd.; Westport, CT; 203-454-5295; [wetmoreassociates.com](http://wetmoreassociates.com).

➤ **Carpentry:** Empire State Local 11; 10 Saw Mill River Rd.; Hawthorne; 592-0100.

➤ **Sheetrocking:** C.W. Brown, Inc.; 30 Clairmont Ave.; Thornwood; 741-1212.

➤ **Plantings:** Bedford Hills Nursery; 666-0374; Katonah Nursery; 232-3570; Gossett Brothers Nursery; 763-3001.

(For a full list of the companies that made the Arena's home makeover possible, visit [abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome](http://abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome)).





LEFT: JAMES AND GINA ARENA, WITH THEIR DAUGHTERS, REACTING TO THE SIGHT OF THEIR NEW HOME DURING THE CLIMACTIC "MOVE THAT BUS!" SCENE OF THE ABC SHOW.

### Monday: Last-Minute Landscaping

On *Extreme Makeover*, no aspect of home renovation gets less attention than landscaping. Gardens don't make for dramatic TV. Yet when I arrive on Monday, two Toms—Tom Alfredo of Armonk's Alfredo LDC and Tom Dieck of Katonah's TRD Design—are still mounting a massive outdoor campaign.

Nevermind the home's small footprint; the Toms are building a pond with a fireman motif, a butterfly bench to commemorate the release of butterflies at Jimboy's funeral, and a giant mosaic stone patio with a Jacuzzi and grill. "We only got the site plan a week ago," Alfredo says, "but it's changed so many times since then that we're essentially winging it." He tells me that today they filled a 60-foot-long hole for the new septic system. Plus, they learned that the family has dogs and rabbits, and so they're improvising animal accommodations. Alfredo jokes, "Ever heard of the term 'controlled chaos'?"

The most chaotic factor is still the rain. It's like Woodstock without the music—mud everywhere. The pump-jack scaffolds, which looked rickety before, now resemble a man on stilts in quicksand. A catwalk of plywood walkways snakes around. "Landscaping and rain don't mix," says Alfredo.

"But fortunately, the soil here is all sand and gravel, so it drains fantastically." Among today's to-dos: a sprinkler system, outdoor lighting, walkway, driveway, and laying out the tree and flowers. "We've never done anything of this scope," says Dieck. "We've got literally hundreds of volunteers who've dropped everything at the busiest time of year to help out. The Katonah nursery, the Bedford nursery, plenty of others. We're doing a four-week, six-figure job in two days."

"Yeah, it makes me think about the addition on my home," Alfredo adds. "It's only 18 by 24 feet, and it's been under construction for three months. This group could bang it out in five minutes. It reminds me of that old saying: 'The cobbler's kids have no shoes.'"

### Wednesday: The Reveal, aka D-Day

Most of the finish work—flooring, cabinets, grouting—takes place on Tuesday, but because ABC has finally caught on to the fact that I'm a reporter, I'm not allowed into the house. Alure's concluding captains' meeting is also private, though I hear that both Ferro and Caldwell break down into a teary "I love you, man" moment. Later, though, I'll witness plenty of action from behind the barricades; today the Arenas are finally returning.

The rain clouds have finally receded, and there's an unusually large crowd—workers and Pennington fans—taking the school bus from the IBM lot to Buena Way. Despite the rain, Alure has not only managed to finish on time, but they've created a majestic barn-red and stone-façade home. It has a sprawling, hardwood first floor; a Tuscan-themed kitchen; a baseball-diamond second floor with a six-sink pink bathroom; and a special memory room in honor of Jimboy. "I've worked with a lot of builders," says Adam Helfman, the show's construction liaison. "But the best, hands down, is Alure."

By 2 p.m., Ferro, Kathy Cline, the two Toms, and the rest of the captains are gathered in front of the home. After being MIA since Friday, Pennington reemerges and runs down the barricades, high-fiving fans. And finally, at 3:30 p.m., a white limo arrives.

The scene is familiar yet entrancing: Gina Arena, seeing the enormous crowd, lowers her head and cries. Daughter Emma hides between her parents. The crowd chants, "Move that bus!" When it does indeed move, the family breaks down. A 17-year-old Casey hugs Pennington. James hugs Gina's parents. And somehow, amidst the chaos, Gina seems to perceive all the generosity and sacrifice that took place, and in a break with the usual format, she runs over to bear-hug Sal Ferro.

When the show aired on May 14, much of what I witnessed was missing. Though the celebrity designers—rarely seen during the week—talked at length about their finishing touches and wall-color choices, neither the downpours nor the volunteers were on TV. Happily, the hug with Ferro did make the cut. And for some reason, watching it on ABC, I flashed back to a small, toddler-sized soccer cleat I'd seen hanging from a backyard tree-limb over the weekend. That shoe had reminded me of Jimboy, how he galvanized his community, and how the *Extreme* builders were keeping his heroic legacy alive.

Gina may as well have been hugging all of Northern Westchester the way she embraced Ferro. And yes, once again, I found myself crying when they moved that bus. ■