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### Somers family gets new home *Tragic loss of son inspires outpouring of support*



*Extreme Makeover* team puts finishing touches on home on Buena Way in Somers after the Arena family was nominated for the project following the death last year of six-year-old Jimmy (inset).

**by Rita J. King**

In a dazzling display of unity and volunteerism, hundreds of people came together in Somers to turn one family's tragedy into a new start—from the foundation right up to the roof.

Seth Selesnow, director of marketing for Alure Home Improvements, the contractor that has completed five makeovers for the ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, was present when the Arena family

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received the news that their 1,500-square-foot home would be knocked down and rebuilt to roughly 3,500 square feet.

"She cried tears of joy," Selesnow said of Gina Arena. "But she said it was bittersweet."

The Arena family won't be able to speak to the media until after the show airs on May 14.

Jim, 40, and Gina, 39, have six daughters—Casey, 16, Jessica, 15, Victoria, 13, Amanda, 10, Jamie, 8, and Emma, 3. The entire community came together to support the Arena family when they tragically lost their son Jimmy, affectionately known as "Jimboy," to an inoperable brain tumor at the age of six.

Jimmy Arena inspired hundreds of neighbors, community members, several fire departments, officials and his own family with his infectious smile and spirit. Fundraisers and birthday parties became a community event, and a parade was held to welcome him home from the hospital.

On September 28, 2005, shortly after his sixth birthday, Jimmy died and the Arena Family lost their only son. In the beginning of April 2006, the Arena family posted a message on [www.jimboy.com](http://www.jimboy.com), a website dedicated to their late son.

"Last week marked six months since Jimmyboy passed on to God," wrote Gina Arena. "It was a very difficult week leading up to that day. Is it really six months already? I reflect on where we were last year at this time, and our Easter Sunday last year spent at the hospital. Along with our wonderful nurses, we planned a dinner for the unit. We all brought something, played baseball and just had fun with the children. It was a life altering experience. As I thought about this special day, I asked God to please send me a sign of where to go, what to do and help me to deal with the anguish of losing my

son."

The very next morning she received the following e-mail: "Gina, you were the first parent I met at Westchester Hospital when our son was newly diagnosed with leukemia... It was Easter Sunday and you brought in all this food to share with everyone. After getting a plate of ham and potatoes I went back to my room and wept. At such a time when I was full of anguish you extended such graciousness and I felt such a wonderful warmth and love from you. One of the first things you said to me was that we now live in a new world. In the beginning I fought to not be a part of this world but when I started letting go I started realizing how thankful I was to be a part of this world. We saw each other here and there and you were just amazing—always strong and positive."

Gina Arena wrote that she is "searching now for the strong and positive part. I think it will return in a stronger and more positive way. Now I live in a different new world. The new world of holding on to memories, letting go of pain and moving on with a shadow of what once was. I can see the pain in other people's eyes as they look at me."

Now neighbors on Buena Way and friends will look at the Arena family with new emotions.

According to Sal Ferro, the president of Alure, Arena is pregnant again—with a boy.

"This a wonderful family," Ferro said. "Our job is to help families live a better life by rebuilding their homes."

He credited the Local 11 carpenter's union for their volunteerism.

"This is so much what they [Arena family] needed," Ferro said. "Nothing will ever come close to replacing Jimboy, but this will help take them in a new direction. It's amazing how many people have come together like worker bees."

Ferro's modesty didn't begin to touch the scope of the sacrifice made by 80 or so of his workers, who braved the unrelenting rain buoyed by the spirit of the task at hand. Selesnow explained that Alure has broken records for the number of jobs completed for *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. With five massive volunteer efforts under its belt, Alure is coming off a back-to-back stint after renovating the home of the Peter family in Queens and now the Arena home in Somers.

The payoff for Alure comes in the form of those whose lives are changed by the company's tireless effort.

Vadanand Peter, 21, is one of nine family members who had been living in a burnt-out building after a fire swept through and destroyed their home.

Peter showed up to volunteer for the Arena rebuild and when he was found sleeping in a van, Selesnow said they made sure he was given a hotel room.

"It's a pleasure to be here," said Peter. "It's a blessing to be able to give back in any way I can."

*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* includes design team leader and carpenter Ty Pennington, Paul DiMeo (carpentry), Paige Hemmis (carpentry/nut & bolts), Michael Moloney (interiors/glamour), Constance Ramos (building/planning), Ed Sanders (construction), Preston Sharp (exteriors) and Eduardo Xol (landscaping), plus two new team members this season, Tanya McQueen (designer) and Daniel Kucan (designer).

The site buzzed with hundreds of workers, performing their tasks in unison as they erected a new home in four days. Spectators watched from behind security fences, among them neighbor Vicki Nestor, who said it took over a year-and-a-half to put two additional rooms on her house. She was stunned by the speed of the process.

"It's pretty amazing," she said. "Everybody has been excited just to know that deserving people in your neighborhood are having their house rebuilt. So many of us watch this show."

Mother Nature was the only uncooperative participant in the event. Siding was put on the new house during a deluge. Frank Justo, the general manager of Mt. Kisco's ARS Service Express, was on hand to install heating and air conditioning systems.

"This was a great experience," Justo said. "Everyone should do it once. An entire house was built in four days."

Asked about what it was like to work in the rain, Justo said: "You know, it was wet."

With two masseuses on hand and a tent for refreshments, the volunteers were able to stop periodically and recharge their batteries before pressing forward, but the sweat on the scene attested to the ceaseless labor on behalf of the Arenas. On Monday morning, landscapers put in a pond in the front yard while trees in full spring bloom were planted.

By the afternoon, fish would swim there.

Windows would be in place.

On Jimmy's website, in April, his mother wrote: "I drive Emma to preschool and I can literally see Jimmy running on the playground in his little cowboy boots, laughing and having fun. I think about being a kid myself and putting my hand out the window of the car to feel like I was flying. So, if you see this adult driving around with their hand out the window, it is this crazy lady touching the wind to capture a moment of childhood. I just want to be a better person. I want to make a difference."

Inspired by the strength of Jimmy and the entire Arena family, hundreds who came together to build a new house seem to

have felt that same spirit of making a difference.

New tiles gleamed in an upstairs bathroom as a worker leaned out for a breath of fresh air and a view of the curious onlookers who were blown away for days as the new Arena house took shape a beam and wire at a time.

Today (Wednesday), the family will return from a trip to Disney World to their home for what promises to be an emotional homecoming, and prepare for the newest member of their family.

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