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Reality show rebuilds home of Somers family that lost son, 6, to tumor

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SOMERS — Gina and James Arena should have a new home in less than a week.

Their 6-year-old son, James "Jimmy Boy" Arena, died in September following a long battle with an inoperable brain tumor that spurred an enormous outpouring of public support. His parents learned yesterday that their home is being rebuilt courtesy of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," a television show that rebuilds run-down or modest homes free of charge for "deserving" families. The show tears down homes and constructs them anew in less than a week.

The project will level the Arenas' cramped, one-story 1,400-square-foot home at 9 Buena Way in the Lake Purdys section of Somers and rebuild it into a two-story residence covering about 3,200 to 3,600 square feet, said Seth Selesnow, marketing director for Alure, the home improvement company doing the work.

Company president Sal Ferro said he was motivated to take on the project in part because he has a 5-year-old daughter and doesn't know what he would do if anything ever happened to her. He said he couldn't go into details about what the new home will entail, and Selesnow couldn't estimate how much it will cost.

"My goal is if I could just play a role in making their lives better, I know I would have accomplished something," said Ferro, whose company is based in Plainview, Long Island. "Nothing will ever replace Jimmy Boy."

The Arenas couldn't be reached for comment yesterday, and Steven Croley, an assistant location manager for the show, said production crews were keeping people away from the family for the week of rebuilding. The Arenas are headed today to Disney World in Florida, where they will stay as their new house is built. Their current home has only one bathroom for the couple's six daughters, according to a news release from Alure.

Jimmy Arena died at the home after slipping in and out of a coma. His struggle against death touched hundreds of local residents, who organized blood drives, held fundraisers and followed the outcome of Jimmy's multiple surgeries through a heartfelt e-mail chain created by his mother, Gina. A January 2005 parade with 20 fire engines and other emergency vehicles greeted Jimmy and his parents after they returned from California, where he underwent aggressive treatment for the tumor.



He was made an honorary firefighter in the Katonah, Goldens Bridge and Somers fire departments and received a full firefighter's funeral. His father, James Arena III, is former chief of the Katonah Fire Department.


The Arenas are expected to first see their new home Wednesday. The show is scheduled to air at 8 p.m. May 14, Selesnow said.

"I think it's a wonderful thing for the Arena family," Somers Supervisor Mary Beth Murphy said yesterday. "They've certainly been through a lot of tragedy, and I think it will be wonderful to see those young girls in a new house."

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