



Project Playhouse

By Sarah Jane O’Keefe, volunteer in prevention, San Bernardino Unit

HomeAid, the charitable arm of the Building Industry Association, has a mission to build transitional housing for homeless families. As an annual fundraiser to help build and update these shelters across the country, HomeAid created “Project Playhouse.” For over 15 years “Project Playhouse” has found support in the home building industry, and as a result they have not only built unique and creative playhouses, but have also raised over \$4,000,000 for HomeAid.

For the first time, CAL FIRE was able to participate in this wonderful charity by building the Prado Lookout Tower Playhouse. Due to the recession in the building industry, the Inland Empire Chapter of HomeAid could not find enough contractors to help in their fundraiser, so they contacted San Ber-

nardino Unit Chief Tom O’Keefe. Chief O’Keefe found eager volunteers for the project at the Prado Conservation Camp. Division Chief Arnie White became the primary project administrator, and Heavy Equipment Mechanic John Miller designed and supervised the project. While searching for sponsors Chief White got in touch with Ron Rezek Jr. of Rezek Incident Support and found complete funding.

This one-of-a-kind playhouse was not only designed and supervised by Prado’s own, but it was also built by nine inmates at the Camp who volunteered their evenings and weekends to complete the playhouse on time. The scaled-down lookout featured a full catwalk, replica fire finder, radio, and a dispatch soundtrack all atop a four foot platform. Not

only did the lookout feature plenty to keep children’s imaginations at play, it also featured beautiful handcrafted furniture including a stand for the fire finder, cabinets, and counter tops.

Outside the lookout there was even more to admire. This playhouse had everything an aspiring firefighter or forester needed for hours of play. Everything from the landscaping to the flagpole with a solar spotlight, and even the anemometer, were perfectly scaled and created with not only pure craftsmanship, but also with sincerity. Many of the inmates who worked on this playhouse had either personally received help from a HomeAid shelter or their family had. Five other playhouses joined CAL FIRE’s and were displayed at Victoria Gardens, in Rancho Cucamonga, from August 23



to September 27. The public was not only able to buy tickets to tour all of the wonderful playhouses, but they were also able to purchase raffle tickets for one of the playhouses. On September 20 CAL FIRE was at Victoria Gardens to promote the fundraiser. Complete with Smokey Bear, CAL FIRE set up a display of local fire engines, a 1964 Model 1 fire engine from the CDF Museum, a bulldozer, an emergency crew transport and a Model 34 engine. Posters and displays around the Lookout Tower carried messages about CAL FIRE’s mission, “Why 100 Feet” and Forest Care. There were nearly 11,000 public contacts during the display.

On auction night five of the six playhouses in this year’s “Project Playhouse” were auctioned off while the fifth was won by a raffle drawing. When it came time for the best playhouse to be auctioned off, (that might be a little bias) the Lookout Tower raised \$13,000 for HomeAid. The attention to detail and professional quality of work put into this extraordinarily life-like playhouse earned the Prado Lookout Tower Playhouse the Chairman’s Award on the night of the auction.

Overall, the fundraiser was a major success, raising \$65,000 in auction sales alone. This money will be going directly to HomeAid to assist with their current projects in the Inland Empire.

One special recipient of Home Aid Inland Empire charity work is California Institution for Women (CIW) in Chino. CIW is the home of CAL FIRE’s Training Center for female inmate firefighters destined for fire crews at Rainbow, Puerta La Cruz, and Los Angeles County. An additional 18 beds are being added to the CIW birthing center courtesy of Home Aid Inland Empire. The birthing center

at CIW allows pregnant women who enter the penal system to remain with their children after birth for a longer period of time than would be possible using a traditional hospital only. This project is valued at \$150,000. CAL FIRE’s participation with Project Playhouse raised almost half the money needed for this important project that will either directly or indirectly benefit CAL FIRE crew members.

To find out more about HomeAid and Project Playhouse, visit www.homeaidie.org or www.playhouseie.com.

Current HomeAid Projects		
Shelter	Services	Location
Mary’s Mercy Center	homeless pregnant women and their children	San Bernardino
California Institute for Women	newborns of imprisoned women	Chino
Mercy House	homeless men, women and families	Ontario
Olive Crest	abused and homeless children	Coachella