

# The Eight-Hour Wonder-House

The inspiring quest of Kitsap volunteer builders to set a world record

On a gray Saturday morning in 1983, while Kitsap County's economy sagged and small builders shuttered, hundreds of volunteers gathered in a quiet subdivision outside Silverdale. By the end of the day, there would stand a finished, fully livable, three-bedroom home.

Not framed. Not roughed-in. Finished.

The story of the "8-Hour Wonder-House" is now legend among longtime members of the Kitsap Building Association (KBA). In less than a workday, tradespeople had turned an empty lot into a family's home - walls painted, carpet laid, appliances installed, landscaping complete. By dinnertime, the project's keys were handed over to a grateful young family.

The result was a quality build at a break-neck pace, a source of pride that still stands 42 years after the fact. Though it isn't a world record, it certainly stands as a local record, and a triumph of volunteerism. The spirit behind it still matters - perhaps more today than in 1983.

The early 1980s were tough years in Kitsap. Stagflation still gripped the economy. High interest rates kept buyers away, jobs felt precarious, and construction slowed to a crawl. Many builders simply walked away.

Against that backdrop, legend has it that John Schufreinder, Jim Ingalls, and Dori Shobert were mulling over the industry's challenges over a round of drinks when inspiration struck: Why not build a house in one day?

Would it be a world record? Maybe.

Would it give bragging rights? Absolutely.

People needed something to brag about. It was bad enough that the industry wasn't making any money. Could they at least restore some of the satisfaction and joy to the work?

"We wanted to show people they weren't alone, that they hadn't been forgotten," Dori recalls. "And plus, it was just something fun and interesting to lift people's spirits!"

The concept was as ambitious as it sounds. The process of building a home - even in the 80's - was complex. From first permit to move-in, the process took months. A failed inspection would set a typical project back by a week.

The trio got to work. Planning, permitting, utilities, and foundation work would all be done beforehand. Then, on a single Saturday, volunteers would converge on the site to raise the house from foundation to finished.

Or so Dori hoped.

It's unusual in construction for any one contractor to see their work through to the finished product. Typically, contractors do their part, then move on to their next job. Framers build wooden frames, then go to their next framing contract. Plumbers install pipes, then move on to the next plumbing job. Rarely do they get the satisfaction of seeing a finished product.

How much was that satisfaction worth? Enough to work for free on a Saturday?

Jim began making calls. Competitors signed on to work side-by-side. Soon, a small army of workers was forming. Architect Frank Knox drew up the plans. Mark Triplett spearheaded permits and utilities. Ron Perkerewicz at the county found inspectors willing to volunteer on a weekend. There was even a celebrity connection: Seattle Supersonics' star center Jack Sickma sold the 10,000 square foot plot to the KBA.

But the real marvel was the sheer outpouring of support: around 350 people threw their hats in the ring.

Permitting at the time took about 90 days, which pushed the groundbreaking into September - dangerously close to the Pacific Northwest's rainy season. Would a volunteer force show up to work in the cold rain?

With the land purchased, the workers signed up, and the window for good weather closing, the project faced an unpleasant surprise: the buyers of the new house pulled out a few days before construction was set to begin.

The KBA scrambled to find a new buyer. Fortunately, they found one. Kath and Jeff Mitchell, along with their four-month-old daughter Winter, had just moved to Kitsap from Bellingham a few months prior. They were 24 at the time, fresh out of college and enthralled with their first-born baby. The Wonder House now had a buyer lined up - and not a moment too soon.

A cold autumn drizzle fell as volunteers trickled in that September morning. Steam from hundreds of thermoses rose from the cold early morning mist. Despite the drizzly weather, all but one team of framers showed up. Kitsap's builders were all-in.

Dori would be their field general. She made an enormous organizational chart on a white board, complete with a gigantic stopwatch to impart urgency with dramatic flair. She was going to direct this patchwork army of volunteers to function like a well-oiled machine.

She had spent weeks planning. There would be a rapid cadence of work, inspection, and transition to the next phase of tradesmen. There would be supply drops to coordinate. Frank, the architect, was the designated “runner,” ensuring there were no materials-related delays. Speed was important, but so was accuracy: re-work was the enemy. Volunteers wore color-coded t-shirts identifying their trade, making it easier to get the right people to the right spot in a pinch. Inspectors wore red. They were to circulate constantly, catching mistakes as they went in order to prevent costly delays.

She said a few words, but didn’t have time to waste. The giant stopwatch started ticking as carpenters rushed to begin framing. Down one framing team, the other three teams of framers worked feverishly to pick up the slack. Like true professionals, they were able to come up with a solution on the fly. Also like true professionals, they hurled a section of uncooperative framing into the forest.

Even professionals get frustrated sometimes.

Mistakes happened, but they didn’t stall the flow of work. Floor trusses and walls went up. With the first major hurdle cleared, they began working on roof trusses. The sawdust flew and Dori kept an eye on her board, anxious to send in the electricians.

They didn’t wait for her signal. They entered the fray, setting up the fuse box and running wire before the subfloor and roof trusses were fully complete. Red-shirt inspectors hovered, signing off and correcting where needed.

The Mitchells, the future occupants, also walked the perimeter, watching with fascination as their house took shape. Baby Winter, in her navy blue “resident” shirt, issued her own babbling orders from time to time - between retreats into Frank Knox’ Winnebago to nurse.

A ballet of craftsmanship swirled. Former competitors worked side-by-side. Craftspeople that had been struggling to find work rediscovered the strength of their hands. People showed off their skills and cracked jokes as they worked. Dori remembers a festival-like atmosphere - work was fun again.

Finally, the outer shell was sealed against the weather, and focus shifted to finishing the inside. The chaos was mostly organized, but it wasn’t without its casualties. Frank, being everywhere at once, stepped through the back sliding glass door at exactly the wrong moment and was sprayed in the face with drywall texture. It made for a good-natured laugh.

Finally, the house was ready for the final touch.

In the front yard, the mailbox and newspaper box were pounded into the ground. The house officially had an address. In a symbolic finale, a bewildered newspaper boy delivered the house’s first newspaper to the cheers of hundreds.

Dori stopped the clock: 7 hours, 56 minutes, and 32 seconds!

With all the hard work done, there was one last supply drop: a pickup truck with a bed full of ice, beer, champagne, and food pulled up. Corks were popped and a well-earned celebration erupted as the Mitchells moved in.

They slept in their new home that very night. What started as a foundation slab that morning ended with a fire in the fireplace and a young family enjoying their new home by sunset.

There were a few callbacks - some carpet needed restretching, a pipe on the furnace needed replacing - but the craftsmanship on the 8-Hour Wonder House has held up. The Wonder House has had less issues than many of its peers in the neighborhood, largely thanks to close cooperation between builders and inspectors - a testament to the power of immediate and effective communication between government and developer.

The Builders' Association netted \$35,000 from that sale. It was enough to purchase land for an office so they didn't have to meet in bars anymore, a move that was probably celebrated by the county's permitting department.

It's easy to see this story through the lens of nostalgia, but these glories of the past can be repeated. Kitsap now faces different problems that seem intractable: a lack of developable land, a labor shortage, and strained relationships between municipalities and builders. It's added up to a housing shortage few could've imagined back in 1983.

But these are solvable problems. Municipalities and builders both have the desire to collaborate. Technology is making the workforce more productive. Neglected urban spaces are being reborn.

When that certificate of occupancy is given and the mailbox becomes an address, magic begins. The house becomes a home, a sanctuary where baby steps are taken and dinners are held.

But the lesson of the Wonder House is that it works the other way around, too: the magic is built with human hands. The magic is hatched in crazy ideas at a bar. The magic is friends getting together on a weekend. The magic is doable. We have everything we need to make magic, then and now. The magic enjoys a nice beer at the end - because the magic is really just us.