



Extreme Takeover: The Makeover Show Hits 100!

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By Joe Rhodes

Practically everyone in Minnetonka, Minnesota -- everyone, that is, except the Swenson-Lee family -- knew what was going to happen on the morning of August 22. They'd all been warned, discreetly, that every street within a half-mile radius of the Swenson-Lee home, at the corner of Park Lane and Oberlin Road, was about to be blocked off, that barricades would be manned by the local police and no one allowed to enter the "impact zone" without a special, authorized pass.

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, ABC's feel-good Sunday-night mega-hit (guaranteed to tug at your heart, bring a tear to your eye and remind you, frequently, that Kenmore Appliances and Craftsman Tools are available at Sears) was coming to town to shoot its 100th episode (a two-hour special airing November 25 and featuring return appearances by some of the show's most memorable families.) Adjustments would have to be made.

The local middle school, over on Ridgemount Avenue, had already become a staging ground, the parking lot filled with workers, volunteers and media types, waiting to be told where to go, as if they were participating in some kind of high-stakes disaster drill. Before the Swenson-Lees were even out of town their neighborhood, a normally-tranquil wooded suburb west of Minneapolis, was being transformed into a loud, chaotic carnival of construction, surrounded by trailers and television production vans, the whole block about to be lit up like a football stadium, 24 hours a day for the next 7 days, the middle-of-the-night glow visible all the way to Interstate 394.

A Manhattan-worthy traffic jam of sightseers and construction vehicles would inch along the perimeter for the duration of the project, an endless rumbling convoy of heavy machinery and flatbed trucks loaded with all manner of equipment and supplies, everything from lumber and cement to port-a-potties and vitamin

waters. Hundreds of carpenters, framers, plumbers, electricians, contractors, sub-contractors, sub-sub contractors and thousands of local volunteers, some more helpful than others, would descend upon Minnetonka like an occupying army, hard-hat battalions wearing the show's signature bright blue -t-shirts, without which no one was allowed on the property. ("It's Extreme Takeover," jokes Page Hemmis, one of the show's on-camera designers.)

"We are a circus, but we are a circus that actually brings a very small number of performers with us. The real circus is all the other people from the community who show up to help," explains executive producer Denise Cramsey, who oversees two, separate 72-person production teams which actually built two houses, in two locations, simultaneously. Local contractors are hired and volunteers recruited for each shoot. The on-camera designers stay with each project from start to finish while Cramsey and hyperkinetic host Ty Pennington go back and forth between the two. Three days before the start of the Minnetonka project, they'd been in Cheyenne, Wyoming, surprising a family there.

In the weeks before the bus pulled into Minnetonka, explanatory fliers were distributed by hand to every business and residence within three square miles of the commotion to come (and which everyone made sure the Swenson-Lee family didn't know about), spelling out what would

happen after the most famous tv bus since the Partridge Family pulled onto Park Lane. The neighbors had all been warned, and we're paraphrasing here, that somewhere in the vicinity of 7 a.m., a disturbingly-tanned man with spiky hair would be bouncing into the yard, bullhorn at the ready, and bellowing "Gooood morning, Swenson-Lee family!" after which the two parents and 7 kids would scream, give grateful hugs to Pennington and his squadron of designers and, eventually, be whisked into a limo and off to the airport for a week's worth of Disney-sponsored fun.

"This has made all of us so happy," Vicki Swenson would say after the week was over, after more than 5,000 well wishers, turning the adjacent lawns into an impromptu amphitheater, cheered the family's return and she'd gotten her first look at the dazzling new 5600-square foot, 7-bedroom, 5-bathroom house that, complete with an elaborately-landscaped yard, had gone up in less than 6 days. "And we could all use some happy for a change."

No one doubted that they deserved it. Even those who didn't know the family personally had seen heart-rending media reports about their story. In September 2006, Eric and Vicki Swenson, popular coaches at nearby Hopkins High School and the parents of three kids of their own, including infant twin daughters, had taken in the four children of Vicki's murdered sister, Terry Lee.

The two daughters -- 11-year-old Taylor and 5-year-old Tara, and two sons -- 9-year-old Tyler and 7-year-old Trevor -- had witness the murder of their mother and her boyfriend -- both of them shot by her estranged ex-boyfriend, against whom Terry Lee already had a restraining order. Because their father had died in a 2001 auto accident, the Lee children had nowhere to go.

So Eric and Vicki Swenson made a place for them in their family and the suddenly-crowded home on Park Lane. Vicki, who has become a prominent advocated for increased enforcement of restraining order and domestic violence laws in Minnesota and across the nation, was also pregnant with her fourth child. They clearly needed more living space, but didn't have the resources to afford it.

Which is why the students at Hopkins High, especially the volleyball players coached by Vicki Swenson, decided to contact *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The family knew they were finalists for the show and that they'd hear whether they'd made it before the morning was done. But until the moment the bus pulled up and Ty Pennington jumped out, they didn't know they'd been selected. They didn't hear Pennington's greeting the first time around, because they were too busy distracting themselves in the living room by singing, "The

Wheels on the bus go round and round" so loudly that they didn't realize what was happening outside their front door.

But everything after that -- the demolition of the old house on Day 2, the foundation and framing for the new one on Day 3, the woodworking, sheet rocking and landscaping on Day 4, the door-hanging and counter-top installations on Day 5, the final trims, painting and wiring on Day 6, the revelation of the new house on Day 7, with Pennington's exhortation to "Move That Bus!" -- went off without a hitch. In 100 episodes over four years, with houses built in all 50 states, in every imaginable climate and locale, the show has never failed to finish a project on time.

Watching the military precision and scale of the operation in Minnetonka, it's easy to see why. They've got this down to a science now, with systems in place to deal with every contingency, plans for weather delays, manpower shortages, to ensure the flow of supplies stays constant, that every perimeter and security detail has been worked out with local authorities in advance. Very little is left to chance. The Swenson-Lee house was actually constructed and ready to be furnished in only 96 hours. It wasn't always this way.

"There were no guidelines when we started," Denise Cramsey says. "We knew nothing about construction. So we just waited until a problem came

up, or someone yelled at us, and then we fixed it.

"We just thought, oh, we'll find a family, fix a house and tell their story," she says, laughing at her own naiveté. "But we quickly realized it wasn't about just one family and one house. What about the two neighbors who are up all night because of our jack hammering? And the five other neighbors who can't get into their driveways because we've blocked the street?"

There were hard lessons learned along the way: never try to build on a cul-de-sac or a hillside, because there's no way for the equipment to get in and out. Advance teams have to go in at least three weeks ahead of the production, to dealing with zoning and security and traffic permits. It wasn't until the second season that producers figured out how much time they could save if, instead of renovating existing houses, they just demolished the old house and built a new one from scratch. There was also that alligator that got under the craft services table in Louisiana, the ice storm that crushed the art tent in Wyoming, the contractors who showed up with fewer workers than they'd promised and less material than they needed.

"That's why it's still a rush every week, because you just don't know if you're gonna pull it off," Ty Penning Would say, exhausted after the Swenson-Lee house had been revealed, just moments before a late-afternoon thunderstorm swept

through, drenching the 5,000 onlookers, man of who had been gathered across the street since early morning. "We're dealing with Murphy's Law out here every single week.

"Other people have tried to do shows like this," he says, plopping down in his trailer, parked just around the corner on Oberlin Road, "but for this to work, people have to trust what you're doing. One of the builders said to me last night, 'You guys are the real deal.' And that's what keeps us going. I don't know if we can do a hundred more. But we'll certainly give it a shot."

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