

# John E. Fike

Copywriting Services

419-371-2302

## extreme mercy, home edition

By John Fike

Written for Shawnee Alliance Church,  
Published in Alliance Life Magazine, Jan. 2006

Tom Martin didn't know what to expect on that night last October as he drove into Hume, a village in northwest Ohio. As deacon at Shawnee Alliance Church in nearby Lima, Ohio, Tom was in charge of the church's Benevolence Fund, and was on his way to visit a family that recently began attending the church.

A ministry team visited with the family a few days before, responding to information on a visitors' information card they'd filled out at Sunday service that week. The family had some needs that the church could help with, team members said. Tom wasn't told what those needs were.

Tom was quite surprised when he finally found house number 5290 on a mailbox. The mailbox at the family's address stood in front of the charred and jagged remains of a house gutted by a long-dead fire.

"I thought, 'What am I getting myself into?'" Tom said in a recent interview.

Next to the abandoned ruins, the garage still stood. To Tom's amazement, the garage lights were on and a car was parked in the property's short driveway. Tom parked his car and walked up the drive to the garage door and knocked.

He was greeted by Rich and Kelly Coby, a young couple with four children, who welcomed Tom and invited him inside.

Tom discovered that the six members of the Coby family were living in the garage. Though it was converted to a one-room living space that included a kitchen, bath and laundry facilities, and drywall on the walls, the garage was crowded and cramped. Furnishings were sparse: a full-sized bed, a twin-sized bed, and boxes for their clothes. Despite their meager living conditions, the family seemed surprisingly content.

Tom spent a couple hours with the Cobys, talking about the things they needed help with. There were some medical needs to be met, some bills to be paid, and some



food, clothing and furnishings to be bought. Tom assured them the church would help with those things. But Rich and Kelly never mentioned the house.

"Tom couldn't believe how happy we were and content with what we had," Rich remembered during a recent interview.

With a little prodding, Rich and Kelly told Tom the story of their misfortune.

On September 6, 2002, a late morning fire ravaged the Cobys' two-story home in Hume. The fire destroyed all that the family had - all that they depended on.

Kelly and the three youngest Coby children were sleeping in the bedrooms on the second floor when the fire started. Rich was at work, though usually he didn't work Fridays, and their oldest son, Tyler, was at school.

By the time 4-year-old Kaeley tried to wake her mom, smoke was rolling through the hallway and rooms of the second floor. Three times Kaeley shook her mom and tried to tell her about the smoke. At last, groggy from smoke she'd already breathed while sleeping, Kelly opened her eyes and saw dark curls of smoke crawling across the ceiling.

Out in the hall, the smoke was so thick Kelly could hardly see enough to gather her other two children. Once she had them, she looked for a way out. A small ray of sunlight broke through the smoke to lead Kelly to a window at the end of the hall. The three children and their mother climbed through the window, and walked across a burning porch roof in bare feet to escape the inferno behind them.

For a year after the fire, the Cobys moved from apartment to apartment, struggling to find a rent they could afford. A check for the house from the Cobys' insurance company got lost at the bank and for at least a year the family had to pay both rent and mortgage. Money donated by community members after the fire helped with expenses for a while, but eventually it ran out. Rich continued to work, but their finances stretched thinner and thinner.

"Finally, everything crashed financially," Kelly recalled.

More often than they changed houses, they changed churches, feeling shunned and unwanted due to their desperate situation.

"People looked down on us because of just our clothing," Kelly said, recalling that all their clothes after the fire were second-hand donations. "We were ready to give up on church. Our faith had dwindled to nothing."

The Cobys decided they just wanted to be home again. With the help of family and friends, the Cobys fixed up the still-standing garage in Hume and moved home a month before Tom's visit.

As far as Rich and Kelly Coby were concerned, they were finally home again. Now that they were back in the familiar surroundings of their neighborhood, without the struggle to pay rent, it mattered little to them that they lived in a garage.

But it mattered to Tom.

"They told me what they thought their needs were, but I saw a much greater need," Tom said.

On the drive home, Tom prayed and pondered the Cobys' situation. Could the church provide them with a new home? Could the church buy them a home elsewhere or build them one on a vacant lot somewhere? What would it cost?

By the time he pulled into his own driveway 20 minutes later, Tom had his answer. God had spoken into his thoughts.

"The Lord told me there's only one answer to this need, and that's to rebuild the house in Hume," Tom said.

A retired carpenter, Tom knew what it would take to rebuild the Coby home and he took his proposition to the senior pastor and board of directors at Shawnee Alliance. Though the church had never taken on a project like this before, no one questioned the plan and Tom got the go-ahead.

"I really believed when Tom presented it to me, that we would do it," the church's Senior Pastor Daniel Messner recalled. "No one objected to the project. It was a real demonstration of the church's faith."

For Tom, the process with which the project came together was miraculous. Nothing got in the way. There were no road blocks. Even before Tom was ready, contractors and businesses that were connected to the church started donating supplies and equipment. The Hume Fire Department had a garage for its fire trucks across the road from the Cobys' home and volunteered space there to store donated supplies. Township officials allowed the project to proceed as long as the new house was built on the footprint of the original house, though zoning regulations would have prohibited it.

A Shawnee Alliance member put Tom in touch with the manager of the local Lowe's Home Improvement Store, who was also a Christian. The manager helped Tom present his project to the company's corporate office. After a couple months company officials decided Shawnee Alliance could buy supplies for the house at the company's corporate cost, which was less than even the local store could buy it for.

Despite the flood of donations and generosity of Lowe's officials, Tom estimated that \$32,000 in building materials was still needed. In March 2004, he presented the project to the congregation during Sunday church service.

Before meeting Tom, Rich had hoped to rebuild the house one day. The still-standing framework and existing foundation could be used and the rebuilding would be affordable in a couple years. By the time the project was presented to the congregation, Rich had already torn down the remaining timbers and pulled out the old foundation to make way for Tom's plans. Rebuilding the house on his own was no longer an option, even for the future.

"Our biggest fear was when they gave the introduction at church," Rich Coby said. "It was in the congregation's hands at that time."

Kelly said she and Rich feared that because they were so new to the church, the congregation wouldn't want to help them.

They were wrong. That same day Tom began receiving financial contributions to the project.

"People that didn't know us were crying," Kelly said, remembering the church service at which the project was introduced to the congregation.

Less than a month after Shawnee Alliance members began giving, construction began. It continued through the summer, with Tom and several others working nearly

every day except Sundays.

"The whole thing was a total surprise to me," Tom said. "I have had no resistance to this project. There was never a shortage of money."

Every day volunteers from Shawnee Alliance worked until dark, wanting to get the Cobys in their house as soon as possible.

"They didn't have to, but they did," Rich said. "That's what gets my heart. We had people helping us we never knew."

"We started trusting the church and Tom and God," Kelly said.

Not even the weather impeded progress on the house. Tom remembered a stormy Saturday morning when a handful of volunteers showed up to set trusses for the roof. A local company donated use of a crane to hoist the trusses to the top of the framed walls and time was limited. Though lightning and rain pounded the county all around them, God held back the storm in Hume until the last truss was set and the volunteers found shelter for lunch.

"We got the last truss set, put the crane down and said goodbye to the driver," Tom said. "We went into the fire station for lunch and as soon as the door closed the rain let loose."

Throughout construction of the house, Tom found the number of volunteers on any given day was never what he thought it should be when he made his plans. But it always turned out to be enough, he said. The right people were always there when they were needed, he said.

Finally, on Aug. 16, the Cobys moved into their new house.

"We feel like we're home again," Kelly said.

For Tom and the other volunteers that worked daily on the new Coby home, the highlight of the project was being able to minister to Rich, Kelly and the kids. Everyday, as they worked together on the house, the volunteers' relationships with the Cobys grew and the Cobys experienced a spiritual healing like they'd never known.

"It was a living hell every day," Kelly said, recalling the nightmares and panic attacks she'd experienced daily since the fire. The smell of neighbors' barbecue smelled like the burning house to her. Snow blowing off a rooftop looked like smoke and the dark of night became choking clouds of ash. "I couldn't live with it any longer."

During a time of prayer and ministry to the family, Kelly began relating the ongoing horror she experienced, and the group prayed for her.

"I felt God heal me that night," Kelly said. She no longer has nightmares and panic attacks, and she sleeps

at night. "From that day, I was healed."

But during the building of their new house, the Cobys also grew in faith and wisdom through their exposure to the volunteers, especially Tom and evening project leaders John Keller and Dick Shaw.

"They would express their concerns, both about the home and spiritually," Shaw said. "Especially Rich while we were working on the house."

"They'd ask questions and it was our opportunity to guide them in the right direction," Keller recalled. "They grew through their exposure to mature Christians. They saw peace and joy in someone else's heart that they'd never seen before."

"The best blessing out of this is the people God brought to us from the church," Kelly said. "These guys that helped us build this house are like family. Out of all the churches we've been to, we've never had a family in Christ before."

Tom said he, too, grew spiritually during the project. He's grown closer to God than he's ever been as he learned to rely on God's wisdom and leading. Tom said he never imagined that he'd be able to raise money and coordinate volunteers like he had to for the project. He said he has greater confidence now in his ability to do the tasks God appoints to him.

"Turned out it was the easiest thing I ever did because I wasn't doing it," Tom said. "God showed me his faithfulness."

"Most remarkable was the men who devoted themselves, regardless of how they felt physically, and accomplished it," Pastor Daniel said. Such a willingness to serve has become rare in modern church, he said. "As a culture we're taught to think first about ourselves."

That way of thinking is overcome when people see service and selflessness modeled by people like Tom Martin, John Keller, Dick Shaw and Larry Reeder, Pastor Daniel said. "Others see it and it becomes contagious."

When an entire church congregation adopts such an attitude, miracles of grace and mercy, such as the Coby home, are possible.

"The Cobys have come to understand God's grace in their lives," Pastor Daniel said. "There's a greater sense of what grace is when it's played out."

There are no strings attached for the Cobys, Pastor Daniel said. The house is a gift to the Cobys, he said, and they can leave Shawnee Alliance if they want to.

"Jesus says if you give a cup of cold water to someone, there's reward for you in heaven," Pastor Daniel said. "We built this house for Jesus."