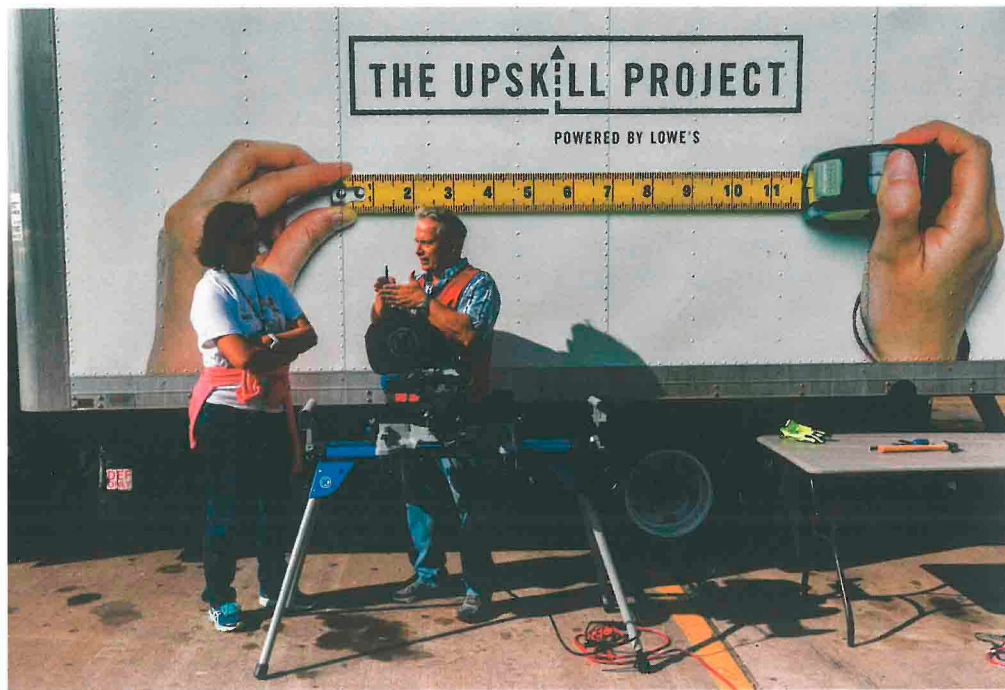


A Helping Hand

Lowe's expands training program to help communities in need



by PAUL VACHON

A clothing retailer once used the tagline, “An educated consumer is our best customer.” They were clearly onto something — perhaps in ways they didn’t quite realize.

In late August 2017, Hurricane Harvey made landfall on the gulf coast of Texas. The Category 4 storm brought winds of some 130 miles per hour and over 40 inches of rainfall. It carries the distinction of being both the wettest and costliest storm in U.S. history, at some \$125 billion.

Damage from a major storm like Harvey is an equal opportunity calamity — retailers who came to the aid of local communities will share their processes for managing disasters in the opening keynote of NRF PROTECT, June 12 in Dallas. Businesses, factories and homes both large and small were all equally impacted by the tragedy, creating a gargantuan need for skilled construction labor. Media coverage drew attention to the need, but once the TV cameras were gone, it became easy for the rest of

the nation to forget the plight of those affected.

After home and business owners finished the grunt work of tearing out and removing debris, countless acres of drywall needed to be replaced, countertops laid and floors installed. The magnitude of the need far outstripped the capabilities of local professionals.

A savvy retailer can look at a situation like this and see an opportunity for community service. That’s where home improvement chain Lowe’s comes in.

TEACHING DIY

“Months after a storm can be the most challenging time,” says Matt Rice, Lowe’s market director of stores. “With much of the nation’s attention shifting and a lack of skilled workers, it’s important to remember the vast devastation that persists.”

Lowe’s had introduced its UpSkill Project a month before Harvey; the innovative series of in-store classes and onsite mentoring sessions is designed to teach basic skills to homeowners who

have the will to tackle home improvement projects but lack the expertise.

The UpSkill Project recruits both Lowe’s associates and specialized experts — designers, general contractors, craftsmen and teachers — to help program participants define and plan projects, purchase required materials and tools, and master the skills necessary to make it happen. The experts don’t do the work; rather, they “teach and guide as needed,” the company says.

“They help participants overcome obstacles by showing them failures are normal part of the process and by instilling confidence to make the next time, the best time.”

The classes are hands-on, with students taking instruction and then actually practicing the chosen skill within the store. Instructors are advised to be patient, as many attendees have little to no background in home improvement.

In response to the unwelcome arrival of Harvey, the company decided to intensify the program at locations in the greater Houston area, and provide a special emphasis on disaster recovery.

“The demand for skilled labor in markets in Houston is so high, many homeowners and tenants must do the repair themselves,” says Ruth Crowley, vice president of customer experience design at Lowe’s. “We wanted to assist in filling this gap by offering free, skill-based workshops to Lowe’s employees and local community members in flood-devastated areas, in an effort to help them put their homes, community and lives back together.”

PAY IT FORWARD

Even without the urgency created by the storm, the need for home improvement know-how is considerable. According to Crowley, 35 percent of American adults are without the skills needed to perform a basic “do it yourself” project.

“The workshops gave Houstonians the opportunity to learn more about drywall installation and repair, tile and wood/laminate flooring and the opportunity to

ask Lowe's professionals about additional home repairs," Crowley says.

The Harvey portion of the program was rolled out to eight Lowe's locations in the greater Houston area beginning last December. The company set a goal of training 1,600 local residents — attendance exceeded that benchmark, drawing between 125 to 250 at each workshop for a total of 2,000 participants ready to help fill the acute labor gap.

According to company statistics, nine out of 10 attendees expressed satisfaction with the classes and would recommend it to family or friends. "The more we see this DIY movement expand through UpSkill participants tackling new projects or passing the skills learned from our associates on to their community, the more successful we've been at empowering a new generation of home improvers," Crowley says.

Although the classes are offered free of charge, Lowe's makes one request of participants at each session's conclusion:

Pay it forward. Participants are asked to share their skills at least once with a neighbor or friend, with the knowledge that their community will be further enriched and additional projects will be initiated. Crowley says that some 75 percent of participants have done precisely this to date.

On a more official level, the company runs a "pay it forward" contest. To enter, program graduates make a video explaining their project and the specific skills required to accomplish it. Winners are selected on various criteria, including "passion and excitement for learning home improvement skills." Prizes include a \$2,000 Lowe's gift card and design consultation services.

EXPANDING ASSISTANCE

Lowe's gathers participant feedback from each session and analyzes the data to see how the program can be improved. The company plans to expand the total program from the 18 cities covered in

2017 to 36 for 2018. Many of these new markets will offer classes aimed at multiple aspects of DIY home improvement beyond disaster recovery.

In addition to UpSkill, Lowe's is involved with several other community service and charitable initiatives. The Lowe's Toolbox for Education program provides monetary grants to schools nationwide that are faced with severe financial hardships. Since its beginning in 2006, a total of \$25 million has been donated.

Through the Lowe's Foundation, the company also contributes \$1.5 million annually to the SkillsUSA campaign, which supports education in the building trades throughout the U.S. and Canada. The Lowe's Charitable and Education Foundation contributes to a variety of causes, including Rebuilding Together, Boys and Girls Clubs of America and The Nature Conservancy. **STORES**

Detroit-based Paul Vachon writes for various trade publications, in addition to feature stories for consumer magazines and books on Michigan history and travel.