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Kate Nelson: It's like reality TV, but this event is worth watching

By [Kate Nelson \(Contact\)](#)
Saturday, June 2, 2007

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Regina "Gigi" Gallegos can barely suppress her glee when eyeing what one day will be a two-story complex of apartments for 18 people learning to live with sobriety.

"In February, this was barren land," said Gallegos, program director for the Endorphin Power Co. "There was an asphalt driveway over there. We tore that up and put the foundation in."

The L-shaped building - a former military barracks donated by contractor Ted Waterman - was set atop it, and crews of workers built walkways, retrofitted utilities and wrapped it with chicken wire in preparation for a stucco job.

And that's pretty much as far as they're going.

Endorphin, which already runs a host of recovery and community programs in its adjacent Southeast Heights headquarters, relies on a tissue-thin budget, oodles of donations and rafts of volunteers. How it was going to pay for outfitted apartments was a mystery.

Then, after the agency's running group finished the Run for the Zoo, Gallegos and the other runners got to talking about how good competition felt. An idea was born. A good one. An idea that fuses "Trading Spaces" with "American Idol." By the end of the day, they had a plan:

the Endorphin Challenge.

Volunteer teams of four people will pay \$100 to get a key to a room as well as a \$1,000 budget and a month to finish the drywall, paint, flooring, toilet, sink, bed and light fixtures.

When the month ends, the teams will inspect the rooms and vote for their favorite. Endorphin will send the winners on a Caribbean cruise.

The response? As fast as you can say "big sale at Home Depot," teams were signing up. As Friday's deadline approached, pretty much every room was spoken for. And the teams weren't waiting to get cracking.

"Three teams have already gotten the flooring donated for their room," Gallegos said. "The contest hasn't even started yet."

Once the units open, people who've completed a sobriety program can apply to stay for \$400 a month. They'll have access to all Endorphin programs, including counseling, a gym, computer training, job-search help and the rotating series of community activities like art and dance classes.

More important, they'll have day-to-day help learning new and healthier habits.

"What I've learned about sobriety," Gallegos said, "is it's easy for them to relapse. We give them the



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tools, like exercise and activities, and hopefully this will give them a new lifestyle. They have new foundations; they have new activities. We want people to find themselves, find a new community."

As for the rooms they'll live in while doing so, she has some of her own ideas about decor - warm, peaceful colors, a bookshelf for self-help books, a place that encourages calmness.

Like me, she's a fan of all those home-renovation shows. And like me, she's seen a few when the family finally sees their new room and the response ranges from unimpressed to deeply distressed.

Isn't she afraid of having at least one Hildy moment?

"There's four team members, and hopefully there's a sane one," she said, laughing. "Seriously, I'm hoping that (having four people) allows people to be creative but also have one person to keep them in check. Since they know who's going to be housed in these, they'll produce something appropriate for that person."

The challenge kicks off at 4 p.m. June 16, Endorphin's annual Juneteenth celebration for the community. You should check it out - 501 Cardeñas Drive S.E. Do a little dancing, sample some food and pat the makeover teams on the back.

Look, they call it "Endorphin" for a reason. It's the natural stuff your brain produces to make you feel good. Getting people off the unnatural stuff and back to being solid community members? Hey, this Endorphin Challenge is one solution to a big problem that's worth feeling good about.

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