

Med student in the house?

His volunteer group that builds homes in Mexico takes on a healthy challenge

Sometime between Christmas and Jan. 18 Robert Katz will hang the Brooklyn Bridge on a wall in Tijuana, Mexico.

First he has to build the wall.

Katz, 33, is a fourth-year SUNY Downstate medical student and founder of One Small House, an 11-year-old group that has built nearly 30 houses for poor families in and around Tijuana.

Built as in raised the money, bought the material, poured the foundation, raised the walls, put on the roof, etc. Each of the 16-by-20-foot homes costs about \$7,000.

"It's a very good size. We basically find people living in shacks and ask them if they would like a house. Our only requirement is that they own the land they are living on," said Katz.

"When we're done, the wife is always crying when we turn over the keys. Most people don't believe we're actually going to do what we said."

All of the work is done free by volunteers, all the materials paid for by donations and fund-raisers. More than 300 volunteers have taken part in the program so far, Katz said.

On Dec. 26, Katz and some 40 people, more than half of them SUNY Downstate students, will head to the Mexican city of Ejidos Lazarus Cardenas to work on the largest program One Small House ever attempted.

Working from a design by architect Sterling Plenert, they will construct a 23-by-72-foot building that will house the city's free clinic.

The building will include a 40-seat waiting room, two bathrooms, and four treatment rooms where a like number of doctors can offer free medical services to the community.

The building will replace a leaky trailer that now houses a six-year-old free clinic now run by poor volunteers with doctors provided by the Mexican government.

Katz admits he was initially reluctant to accept the project.

"In May, the group of women who had been running this free clinic approached me while we were down there on another project," he said.



Robert Katz, a med student at SUNY Downstate, shows plans for health clinic that his group One Small House will build in Mexico. Photo by Nicholas Fevelo

"They said, 'We saw that you build houses. Can you build us a clinic?' I looked at them and said, 'No. I build little houses, \$7,000 each. I did the math, and this was about a \$40,000, \$50,000 project.'"

Born in New Rochelle, Katz joined the Marine Corps after graduating from New Rochelle High School. He served in Japan, Kuwait and Iraq as a combat photographer. "I got to travel the world, meet a lot of people."

In 1999, he used his G.I. Bill benefits to enter Hunter College,

then SUNY Downstate in 2007, where he is studying family medicine.

Katz has been building houses since 1999, when he volunteered with the group Habitat for Humanity on a Yonkers project.

That same year a friend took him to Tijuana to work with Club Dust, a group of former California surfers who build houses there for poor people.

The Club Dust people encouraged Katz to start his own group, and One Small House debuted a year later.

Katz's group has built all its homes using a Plenart design. Most building materials are purchased from local Mexican com-

panies. Volunteers pay their own expenses.

Still, Katz was reluctant to take on the clinic, but when he got back to SUNY the project took on new life. "Word got out, and we raised about \$23,000 just in the school," he said.

So the clinic is a go even as Katz continues to raise the estimated \$17,000 needed to complete it. To do that he will continue a practice that met with much success on earlier projects: make a donation on the group's website (www.onesmallhouse.org) and you'll receive an email picture of the building material — a piece of plywood, a door, a window, etc., — that your money bought.

Donors can also watch the actual clinic construction as the work is streamed live on the website.

"People have said they were having a bad morning, saw the picture of where their money went and it turned everything around," Katz said. "Someone told me they cried. Another lady donated again because she wanted another picture."

When the new clinic opens on Jan. 18, Katz hopes to hang a new logo on the wall — a modified version of Downstate's Brooklyn Bridge-themed design.

To donate or volunteer, visit the website. www.onesmallhouse.org. crichardson@nydailynews.com

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