



The three Robles brothers (from left), Juan, 22, Jose, 24, and Mario, 26, in front of a house that Jose bought in Nestor. The brothers were foster children and Jose has saved his money since he was 14 with the goal of buying a home and bringing his family back together. DAVID BROOKS • U-T

For a band of brothers, house becomes a home

Former foster youth overcomes hardships to realize his dream

CAROLINE DIPPING • U-T

The lawn was dead. Windows were broken.

Holes were punched in the walls and baseboards were missing. The toilets and sinks didn't work and roaches skittered about.

But to 24-year-old Jose Robles, the dilapidated house he bought in July was a palace. It was worth all the money he had cobbled together from age 14, working at everything from distributing fliers to flipping burgers. It was also the first place he could call "home" since he and his five siblings went into foster care more than a decade ago.

"I was very ambitious for getting a house, getting my family the food we wanted, beds, all those things we never had," Robles said. "I saw all my friends living together with their

families, and I wanted that."

With a \$14,000 down payment, Robles bought the 1,200-square-foot house on Caulfield Drive in Nestor for \$225,000, realizing his goal of providing a stable atmosphere for himself and his brothers, Juan, 22, and Mario, 26. Figuring they would make the needed repairs as they went along, Robles hadn't counted on the legion of good Samaritans who stepped in.

With the help of Just in Time for Foster Youth, a nonprofit that gives emancipated foster youth opportunities for self-sufficiency and several local companies, this once uninhabitable house is being transformed into a home. When he was 12, Robles' family life unraveled when his father was sent to prison and his mother, unable to cope, gave her eldest daughter \$20 for food and left. The last time Robles spoke with his mother was a year ago, when she called from Mexico, asking him to wire her money.

Robles' grandmother initially took in the children, but relinquished



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Jose Robles, who while in foster care at age 14 decided he would one day buy his family a house

them to social services a few months later. Placed at Polinsky Children's Center, they were relocated because of overcrowding, but no foster home was available to take in the large brood and they never lived together again.

"We rarely saw each other," Robles
SEE BROTHERS • A14



Jose Robles (left) stands in the doorway of his room in the house that he bought for himself and his brothers in San Diego's Nestor neighborhood. Jose and his brothers, Mario (center) and Juan, were placed in foster care more than a decade ago and soon they will live together in the house. DAVID BROOKS • U-T PHOTOS

BROTHERS • Nonprofit group for emancipated foster youth is pitching in

FROM A1 said. "At first, we were going with the flow and thought eventually everything would go back to normal."

"A few months later, we were moved again. I was thinking, 'Wait a minute. This is tearing us apart.' It was very confusing."

Eventually, Jose and his brother Juan were placed in foster care together. Then 14, Robles began dreaming of buying a house.

Over the years, to save money, he walked instead of taking the bus. He tutored, passed out fliers for \$2 an hour, and worked at Carl's Jr. and Hometown Buffet while attending San Diego

State University. In 2006, he got a job at the County Library in Lemon Grove where he is now assistant branch manager.

Robles "aged out" of the foster care system at 18. On a stable path in his 20s, he longed to be with Juan, a Starbucks barista, and Mario, a sales rep for Skechers. (His sisters live elsewhere — the youngest is still in foster care, one attends college out of town, and the eldest moved to Sacramento.)

Doing the math, he had \$14,000, enough for a down payment, but with a \$1,600 monthly mortgage, repairs would have to be made piecemeal.

Then, members of Just in Time for Foster Youth learned of the Robles brothers and went into overdrive. Its "My First Home" program provides furniture for a youth's first home, but additional pleas for support were sent out and soon, donations of time, supplies and services poured in.

Kaminskiy Construction Inc. donated kitchen cabinets, EDCO a Dumpster for renovation debris. Anderson Plumbing gave a water heater, paint from Behr, beds from Sleep Train. Tony Moreno's flooring company rolled out new tile, carpet and wood-look laminate, and designer Lynne Doyle

created a contemporary palette of blues, greens and browns for the walls.

On Sept. 20, trainees from the Labor Council's Youth Build program began gutting the house — all that remains of the original interior is a paneled living room wall — with a goal to ready the Robles' home in time for the holidays.

"It's one of those things that ripples out," said Don Wells, executive director of Just in Time for Foster Youth. "The brothers were in a situation for a lot of their lives where everybody was getting paid to take care of them. Social workers, lawyers. It wasn't bad, it was

just the way it was.

"What is so transformative and a revelation to Jose is that people are now helping him just because they care, because they want to."

Robles feels that love. When talking about the group that marshaled all the resources for his home, his emotion overflows.

"All the other programs and organizations I've been involved with, I've never felt such a welcome as I have with them," Robles said. "They know we are trying our best. There is no way I would be here today without them."

Until the construction dust settles, the broth-

ers have been sleeping in the garage and existing on snacks like Doritos and microwaveable Totino's Pizza Rolls. They look forward to having their own bedrooms and watching football on TV. And they are planning for the future.

"My foster mom has tickets to come from Oregon for Thanksgiving," Robles said. "I have also contacted the rest of my family and we are planning on having a big dinner together."

"The house should be done by then. We are very excited for that day."

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