

Byrd graduate part of “Extreme Makeover” in Blacksburg

By Gene Marrano

William Byrd High School graduate Amanda Walton McCreary and the design-build firm she works for in Roanoke - Building Specialists Inc. - were at the center of the “Extreme Makeover” project in Blacksburg when the hit ABC television show contracted the company to demolish and construct a new home. The recipient was Carol Crawford-Smith and her two sons, who were welcomed back to Blacksburg on Sunday. After being sequestered in a hotel on the west coast, the family saw the result of non-stop volunteer work from designers, carpenters, electricians and other laborers.

McCreary, a designer, was among those who endured freezing temperatures, ice and snow over the weeklong process, when Crawford-Smith’s ranch home was torn down and completely rebuilt. “We’ve got tons of labor on the site right now...we’re working through [the weather],” said McCreary from Blacksburg toward the tail end of the process. “Everyone is just working together as a team.” They all worked for free noted the 1999 Byrd graduate - but the goodwill generated and the publicity for firms like Building Specialists didn’t hurt.

The Roanoke contractor specializes in high-end residential homes and was selected by Extreme Makeover producers for the Blacksburg project. “They heard we were the best in town,” said McCreary, who was Amanda Walton at Byrd and has a degree in architecture from Virginia Tech. She got to meet the stars of “Extreme” while on site and said, “It was pretty crazy to see a house go up in less than a week. It’s kind of a surreal feeling. A few weeks ago it was just a design on paper.” Long hours led to the new one-story house with vaulted ceilings. “I don’t like the term ranch,” McCreary added, struggling to talk as she battled the lack of down time many volunteers were dealing with. “We haven’t slept in a month.”

There are other Byrd connections to the Extreme Makeover build: project manager Daniel Furst of Building Specialists has a brother (Drew) who teaches at WBHS while school secretary Vickie Carrell has a son was involved through a local advertising agency. McCreary was the only female in her Auto Cad and drafting classes at Byrd; even as a little girl she would draw pictures of houses to show her parents.

On Sunday team leader Ty Pennington of Extreme Makeover welcomed Crawford-Smith to her new home, which is entirely handicap-accessible. That was important for Crawford-Smith, since she has been stricken with Multiple Sclerosis. The home is more than twice the size of the original and will be featured on the ABC program later this winter. Crawford-Smith is a former ballet dancer and well-known instructor now struggling with her illness.

McCreary was featured on local television news during the construction and expects to see herself when ABC airs the Blacksburg segment. She called the build for Crawford-Smith exciting and rewarding. “We’ve put a lot of time and hours into this. When she comes home we’ll really see the benefit and reap the awards from what we’re doing.” Local contractor supply companies and even Building Specialists competitors chipped in to make the new home a reality as hundreds of people watched. All in a day’s - make that a week’s work - for Amanda Walton McCreary: “it’s about the community - and about this family getting a good house.”

Amanda McCreary’s bio from the Building Specialists Web site (bsiva.com): Ms. McCreary is part of Building Specialists’ commercial and residential teams. A 2004 graduate of Virginia

Tech, she earned a bachelor's degree of architecture after completing an award-nominated thesis project. Native to Roanoke, Ms. McCreary attended William Byrd High School and worked with a local real estate appraiser and developer throughout her education where she gained extensive experience in historic preservation. Ms. McCreary's design talents will be tapped for Building Specialists' residential work, while her attention to detail and organizational skills make her an invaluable addition to Building Specialists' commercial estimating and project management team. Ms. McCreary is an associate member of the Blue Ridge chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).