



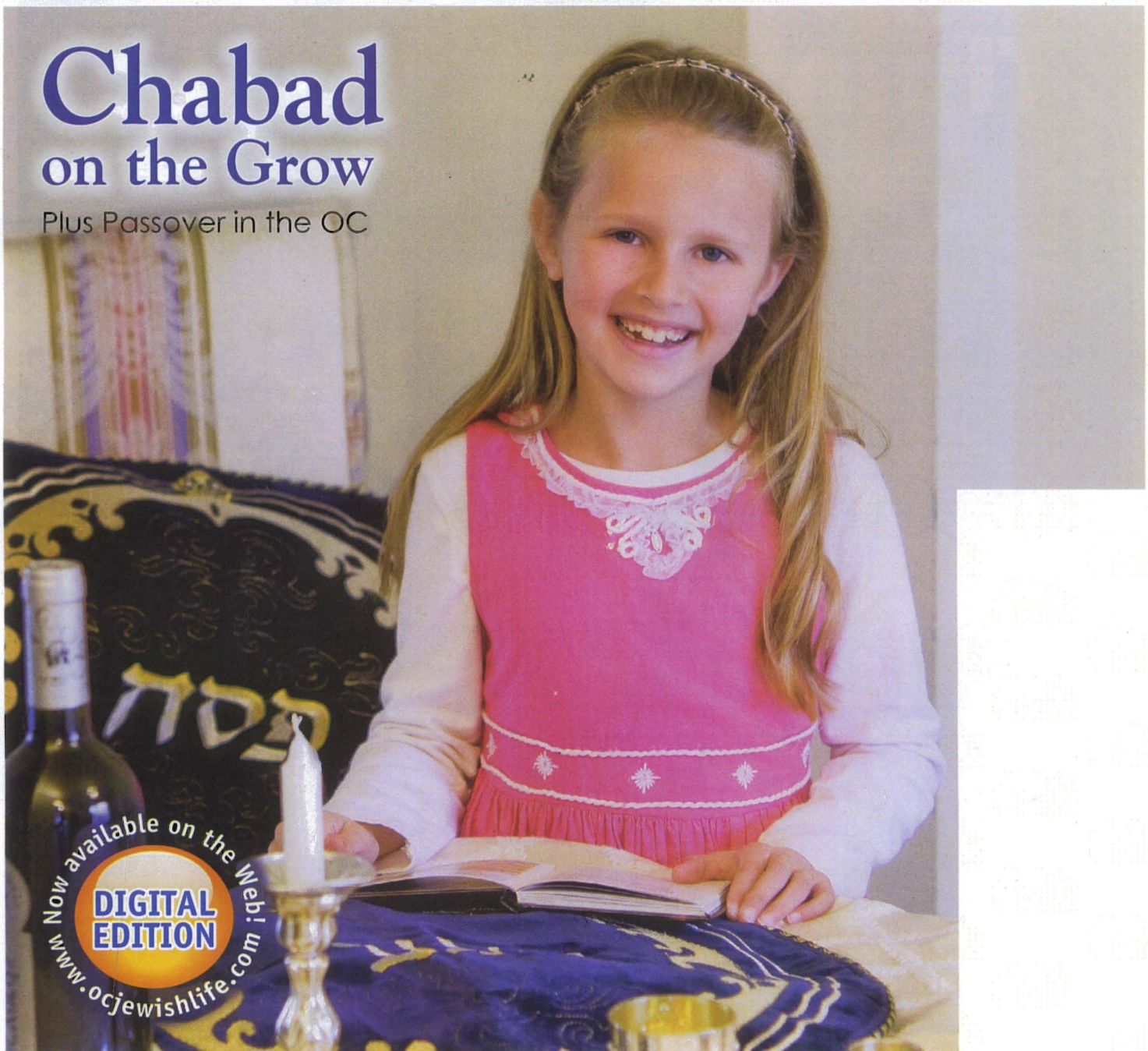
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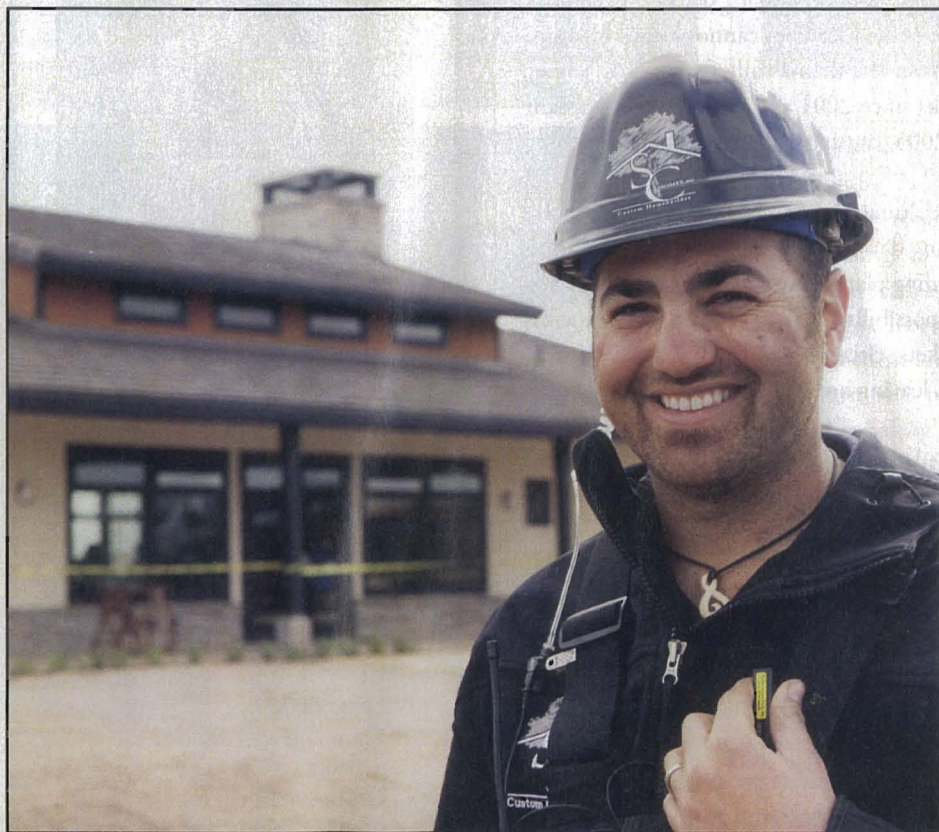
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## Extreme Makeover: Home Edition

B'nai Israel board member is tapped to do the job.

By Harriette Ellis



Scott Cross at the Learning Center

If you were like hundreds of thousands of people across the United States and 69 other countries on Sunday night, March 29, you very possibly were watching the 2-hour special of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. If you waited long enough, you would see on the screen for a fleeting moment or two a familiar face: that of a handsome young man by the name of Scott Cross. You may not know him, but members of Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin surely do, because he is one of their

intrepid volunteers. An active member of the Conservative synagogue's board of directors, he's followed in the footsteps of his parents, Mark and Sue Ann.

Scott was ready to take over his father's electrical contracting business as his father gradually slowed down. Scott reminisced recently in his small "office" attached to his family's home, how, having grown up in the business, starting as a six-year-old sorting nuts and bolts, he had worked summers during high school as an "ac-

countant" for his dad. As a college graduate, he had turned the company into a construction firm building "spec" homes and was looking to do some good in the community when he spoke with his cousin David Bohler during a Thanksgiving dinner. David, a construction manager for the television show *Extreme Makeover* (EM), told Scott the crew would be working on a home in California in January.

Scott inquired about submitting his application to donate time and expertise in order to have this golden opportunity to "give back." The Ty Pennington show is all about honoring those "heroes" in a community by building a decent place for them to live comfortably and continue their good work. "It's not about what we do as donors," explained Scott. In this case it was about building a home and learning center for the Almquist family of six — father, mother, and four children — who rescue and care for wild animals that have been abused or discarded and left to die. The family had been living in the high desert town of Phelan near Hesperia, in a decrepit double trailer and barely able to make ends meet, much less care for the animals. The new home of 3,400 square feet would be built in the area, plus the cages and the learning center, which Scott and his crew were assigned to build.

Scott soon learned it was quite a process. "I had to compete with hundreds of other builders. This would be a big project, because not only a main residence had to be built, but also cages and a separate sanctuary to house the animals. We had to have two contractors." Donating at this level was "a whole new element for me. I found out that everything is on the builder's shoulders." While the designers and producers were working on the project for two years, and the family chosen from hundreds of nominations, "We only had a month



and a half to plan the project. At the end of December we began, and the architects started to draw their designs, which they did in just a few weeks!"

The cheerful young builder continued, "I had always thought of donating as a monetary contribution or maybe cooking at a special event for the Ronald McDonald House! But when the TV team approached us, they said, 'We're not going to pay you, and you have to get everything you use donated: all the materials, all the labor.'" And further, he said, "It all had to be built and completed in 106 hours!"

But Scott rose to the challenge, and, "We completed the whole thing in 100 hours — six hours ahead of schedule!" He asked himself, "How am I going to get people to volunteer their time for this? But we soon had too many volunteers! Since we worked 24/7, some would stay all night or hang around" just in case someone extra was needed. "We brought in over 2,000 non-skilled workers, most from the local area around Phelan, but many came up from Congregation B'nai Israel. We also brought in an additional 1,000 skilled trade workers who donated their time, so in all we

## Few of us get the opportunity to help on such a grand scale: to change the lives of an entire family.

got help from over 3,000 people -- all free. Then we had to get all of our construction material for the cages for the animals and the learning center -- the plaster and the concrete and everything we needed to build. Everything had to be donated!"

There were so many issues to deal with during the filming and construction. He said Pennington believed this to be one of the three hardest projects EM had ever done. "We had snow, we had rain, freezing wind and mud, and even fire. The trucks got stuck in the mud -- it was one-and-a-half miles from the main road to the construction site. A few days before construction started, the design team members learned they needed a sprinkler system. They did in four days what normally would take months. The system also had to be donated. But it was, and completed according to stringent county building codes.

Scott said he was used to getting reluctant volunteers to help at his synagogue, where he

donates hundreds of hours. This monumental task, however, was very different. "It was great working with Ty Pennington and all the designers and crew, and those working behind the scenes were amazing. So much talent."

Apparently, the feeling of the TV *Extreme Makeover* crew was mutual. Diane Korman, senior producer at EM, told us that "Scott was incredible to work with. Even with the economy taking a toll on builders all across this nation, Scott shut his business down and put his heart and soul into helping a family that really deserved it. He is such a mensch!"

Scott said his family "was really into it." Everybody got into the act: his mother and father, his brother-in-law Craig Bilewitz, who acted as project manager; his sister Sheri Bilewitz got amazing donations: four 4-year scholarships from U.C. Riverside for the children when they reached college age. Scott raised an additional \$50,000, and El Pollo Loco provided the family with food for a whole year. "Ford Motor Co. gave them a truck," he said with a huge grin. "My Jewish community gave so much. It was an amazing experience." Even his five-month-old son, Kayden, was on the scene.

Growing up, Scott knew what it meant to be a Jew and to "give back" to his community. "We kept kosher; I went to religious school at B'nai Israel and was a Bar Mitzvah there. My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, so Judaism means a lot to me. I hope to have my son grow up at B'nai Israel, too." Scott's wife, a convert under the tutelage of Rabbi Elie Spitz, has also gotten the bug — she's started a temple program to assist seniors.

Now, Scott can now add tikkun olam to his bio in 36-point letters. Few of us get the opportunity to help on such a grand scale: to change the lives of an entire family. Scott now can go back to his construction business building custom homes in the high-end market around Orange County with sweet pride.



The Almquist family