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A contractor stole their money. The community rallied to fix their flooded home.

Jaylan Gray's mother died two years ago of a blood disorder, leaving him alone in their Texas house with his little brother, then 10.

"Before she died, she told me not to sell the house," said Gray, 22, whose stepfather had died several years earlier. "My mom and my stepdad had paid it off and she wanted us to live in it." Then, last year, disaster struck at their three-bedroom house near Houston, when the pipes burst in the [massive winter storm](#) that left millions of Texans without power for days. The house was quickly flooded from the attic, soaking and ruining ceilings, walls and floors.

Gray hired a contractor to make repairs, but the contractor punched holes in walls throughout the house, then disappeared with about \$20,000, he said. Gray didn't have the resources to pursue the matter.

He filed a police report, but authorities were unable to find the contractor. Gray eventually decided to move on, he said. He didn't have homeowners insurance to cover the damage because the policy had lapsed, he said.

He wanted to find another way to repair the house so it was livable, but with everything on his plate, he didn't know where to turn. "I couldn't keep up with it — it was just too much," Gray said about the house, which is in [Katy](#). "I couldn't afford to make the repairs."

Overwhelmed, Gray and his brother, Julian Nicholson, moved across town to live with their grandmother. But Julian had to change schools, and both of them wanted to return to the home where they had lived with their parents.

"We were really grateful to her, but I always wanted to move Julian back to the house where we grew up, so he could play football at the same school I did," Gray said.

"I want to make sure he doesn't get in any trouble and that things can be smooth as possible for him in school," he added.

Gray, who had been enrolled in college, stopped taking classes and got a job at a car inspection company to help pay the bills and raise his brother.

"Julian became my priority," Gray said of his brother, who is 12 now and entering seventh grade. "I promised my mom that I'd look after him and the house, so I dropped out of college."

"I wanted my brother to feel cared for and loved," he said, adding that he had no idea what he was going to do with the damaged house, but he decided he was not going to give up on it.

Then in the spring, Kevin and Michelle Duty, who volunteer with the community nonprofit [Katy Responds](#) — which helps rebuild homes after natural disasters — heard from a friend about the brothers' situation.

"It was just heartbreaking to find out what these two had been through," said Kevin Duty, 56. "For Jaylan to have to take on that much at such a young age was unimaginable."

Duty contacted the nonprofit's executive director, Ron Peters, and filled him in.

“We thought Katy Responds would be a good fit to help them,” Duty said, noting that the group relies on community donations and volunteers to renovate homes damaged in natural disasters. Peters said he immediately agreed to help and contacted several dozen volunteers after he’d taken a close look at the house. “When I walked in, my heart sank,” he said. “They’d lost everything to the pipes breaking except for their mother’s dining room table,” said Peters, 59. “There were holes in the walls, the floor was completely ruined, and the air conditioning system was gone. The contractor they’d hired had stolen it.”

Peters told Gray that his group could repair the home free of charge in about three months — just in time for the beginning of the new school year. “We’ve fixed 160 homes and the stories from each renovation are emotional,” he said. “But this one really touched our hearts.”

Volunteers repaired the roof, hauled away ruined furniture and flooring, put up new drywall, and rewired, plumbed and painted the entire house. “From the very first day they said they were going to take on this project, I wanted to help,” said Pauline Mabry, 61, who has volunteered with Katy Responds for two years. “I felt devastated that this young man had to have all of this responsibility after his mom died,” she said. “This is the house where he grew up with his brother. I wanted to help make it new again.” Mabry said she helped haul out the damaged drywall, baseboards and kitchen cupboards, then tackled a lot of the repainting.

She was joined on several weekends by Gray, who helped paint walls until he was asked to bow out during the final phase of the work. “We really wanted him and Julian to be surprised at the end result,” Peters said. When the brothers walked into their renovated home Aug. 12, they could hardly believe what they were seeing. They both cried, Gray said. Volunteers gave them a new kitchen and bathrooms, and Houston’s [Lakewood Church](#) donated new furnishings.

The project cost about \$50,000. It ran overbudget by about \$10,000, said Peters, who is raising funds to cover the rest. “What they did for us is so much more than I ever imagined,” Gray said. “My goodness, I was blown away. Everybody was so kind to us — they went above and beyond.”

“It makes me happy to see that there’s good people,” Julian told [local television crews](#) that were there to capture his reaction. “I just like the way we’ve been treated,” he said through tears. “I didn’t think anything good would happen.”

Gray said their mother, Roslyn Nicholson, would have been thrilled with the home improvements.

Gray said he hopes to return to college someday and pursue his dream to become a park ranger, preferably in Texas. “I love being out in nature — that would be the ideal job for me,” he said. Until then, he said he’s content to help his brother with homework at their mom’s dining room table.

“I want Julian’s future to be better than what I went through,” Gray said. “My little brother is my main purpose right now. Just seeing him every morning makes me smile.”

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