

Making a Difference

Homes, Sweet Homes

A real estate innovator shares shelter in Nicaragua.

► **BLAKE ANDREWS** has gone skydiving nearly 400 times. As a gifted young tennis player, he competed alongside Andre Agassi, Jim Courier and Monica Seles. But no leap out of a B-52 at 14,000 feet, no smashing serve or killer volley ever matched the thrill he experienced when visiting Popoyo, Nicaragua, in June 2011, and sliding shoes onto the bare feet of local children as part of a giving trip with TOMS.

The 200 pairs of shoes were meant to change the kids' lives—when children have shoes they're more likely to attend school, for one thing—but they also changed Andrews' life.

"I decided right then that whatever I did for the rest of my life, I wanted it to be something that gives back," says Andrews, now 38, who was working for TOMS at the time of the trip. He was shocked to see people living in makeshift structures of tarp and wood, shanties that offered little protection against Nicaragua's long rainy seasons. "I remember the first time I walked into a family's home," he says. "It was probably 6 feet by 6 feet, with a dirt floor and a wood pallet that all six people in the family slept on. I saw what a pair of shoes could do for a kid and I thought, *Imagine the difference you'd make if you could figure out a way to build homes for these families.*"

Now, less than three years after that trip, Andrews, with help from his wife, Tricia, has launched Giveback Homes, a national network of real estate agents and mortgage brokers who give away a portion of their commissions to help build homes for people in need.

Inspired by the TOMS model of sustainable giving through its "one for one" pledge to donate a pair of shoes for every pair purchased, Giveback Homes is a way of doing good and also good business, as Andrews puts it.

Giveback Homes agents and brokers have a branding platform that distinguishes them from their



Sandra, a single mother, stands in front of the ramshackle house where she and her family once lived.

competitors, and the confidence that the money they donate will lead to tangible results. "Members can give whatever they want, whenever they want," Andrews says, "and know that 100 percent of their donation, which is entirely tax-deductible, will go to the field." (A \$50 monthly fee for each Giveback member covers the cost of marketing, advertising and social media outreach.)

"I think that buyers who are socially conscious will want to work with us," says Scott Tamkin, a Los Angeles real estate broker who recently joined Giveback Homes. "And those are the types of clients I most want to work with."

Shelley Levitt is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer who regularly writes for *MORE*, *WebMD* and *Women's Health*, among other publications and websites.



Blake Andrews (left) joins Nick Schneider (right), the very first Giveback Homes Realtor, to donate a newly built house to this Nicaraguan father and son.

Working in collaboration with nonprofit groups Habitat for Humanity and Waves of Love, Giveback Homes has so far built five homes in remote areas of Nicaragua. The dwellings are modest, an average of 250 square feet, barely the size of a walk-in closet in the upscale homes that many Giveback brokers sell. But the simple structures are life-transforming.

Consider the impact of replacing dirt floors, ubiquitous in Nicaragua's poor communities, with concrete floors: "Mothers carry their children for the first years of their lives," Tricia says, "because if they allow them to play on the dirt floor, they're likely to contract parasites, anemia or chronic diarrhea." A concrete floor dramatically improves children's health.

The homes have a ripple effect on Nicaragua's impoverished communities, where 80 percent of people live on less than \$2 a day. The bricks that go into the homes are made from indigenous red clay and produced locally, boosting employment. People in

the communities receive training in construction and finance, and then go on to teach those skills to their neighbors. The new homes also bring healthy water and sanitary bathrooms to villages where contaminated water leads to dysentery, a common cause of death in children under 5.

Andrews hopes to build about 300 homes in the next year and about 500 annually once Giveback Homes is up to scale. That may sound like an ambitious plan, but Andrews is used to building things from the ground up.

He first learned perseverance on the tennis court. He picked up a racket when he was 7, and by age 12 was the top player in his age group in Texas. When he was 14 he moved to Bradenton, Fla., to train at the legendary Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, with Agassi living next door. He lived there for two years, then, homesick, went back to Texas, where his parents own a large beer distributorship. As the only son in the

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family (he has an older sister), Andrews was expected to work in the family business when he graduated from Southern Methodist University. “But I wanted to do something on my own first,” Andrews says.

Just out of college, he co-founded Streamwaves, an early online music service. The company signed licensing deals with every major music label and had some 150,000 subscribers. “We were really gaining traction,” Andrews says, “and then a little thing called iTunes started.” A few months later, Streamwaves folded and Andrews called his father. “I’m ready to learn the beer business,” he said.

Andrews started at the bottom, working in the warehouse from midnight until 10 a.m., counting cases of beer with a handheld clicker. After a year and a half, he moved on to driving a beer truck. He next spent a few years in sales, then managed the company’s group of Mexican beer brands and built other accounts. By the time he was 35, after a decade in the suds business, Andrews was ready for a new challenge.

He reached out to childhood buddy Blake Mycoskie, who had started TOMS just a few years earlier. In 2010, Andrews joined the company as a special projects manager. At a trade show in Florida, he was approached by Michael Lindsey, the founder of Waves of Love, a Christian charity building homes for impoverished families in Nicaragua. Andrews admits that Lindsey “might have been looking for the other Blake” when he invited him on their next trip to Popoyo.

Andrews brought along 200 pairs of TOMS shoes, and those eight days in the rural village introduced him to lives that made his long nights in the beer warehouse seem like the high school prom.

“It’s eye-opening,” he says. “These people are never comfortable. Something as simple as getting a drinkable cup of water is near impossible; people don’t have mattresses, or plates to put their food on. There’s never enough to eat. And when it rains, their homes and everything inside get soaked.” By the time he left Nicaragua, Andrews had donated money to build a library, bought a family two mattresses and taken the mother on a three-hour bus ride to the nearest dentist to have three rotting teeth pulled.

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After three years at TOMS, Andrews left the company in June to devote himself full-time to Giveback Homes. Things are moving at a faster pace than he’d imagined.

He is in discussions with Habitat for Humanity about building homes in the United States, a goal he thought was a year or more away. His own real estate broker, Nick Schneider, who sold him the beachfront home he and Tricia will soon be moving into, and who was the first to sign on as a Giveback Homes Realtor, has already been to Nicaragua to supply hands-on help in home construction. Andrews hopes to organize dozens of trips for Giveback members in the future.

The number of mortgage brokers participating doubled recently, when Mortgage Capital Associates in Santa Monica, Calif., committed to signing up 50 brokers.

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Andrews, the onetime beer salesman, is an effective evangelist for his new venture. Recently, on a flight from Dallas, he struck up a conversation with Baron Davis, the two-time NBA All-Star. A few days later, Davis called and said he wanted to build a home in Nicaragua on behalf of himself and his fiancée.

Andrews has no doubt that Giveback Homes will grow and endure. “I’ve been very blessed,” he says. “Now my wife and I are dedicating our lives to giving back. We’re in this for the long haul.” **S**