

Fresno State 'spring-breakers' equip woman's home with solar panels

By Hannah Furfaro



Standing next to a stack of new solar panels, Dolores Torres can't contain her excitement about getting solar installed on her central Fresno home, with the help of Fresno State students on their spring break.

JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

In Fresno's Lowell neighborhood, an olive green bungalow with an American flag on the porch and a brick chimney poking from the roof is getting an upgrade.

It's easy to miss the young men and women working on the backside of the home. Only their bobbing white hard hats are visible over the roof's crest as they secure new equipment: \$10,000 worth of solar panels that will save homeowner Dolores Torres hundreds of dollars each year on her energy bills.

It's not a sight you're used to seeing in this part of town.

Just north of downtown, many of the homes here have seen better days. Some have boarded or broken windows, peeling paint, or in Torres' case, termites.

"If you look around, how many houses do you see that have solar panels? You see none," says 22-year-old Angelica Robertson, a Fresno State senior who organized the installation on Tuesday.

The day was a culmination of months of planning by Robertson and a handful of other generous Fresno State

students.

The group is part of the university's [Alternative Spring Break](#) program. The students are working during their spring vacation with nonprofit renewable energy company [GRID Alternatives](#) to install solar panels on two Lowell neighborhood homes. The equipment and maintenance are covered through a [state energy grant program](#) for low-income families.

Most of the students aren't trained in construction. But with the help of two installation gurus from GRID Alternatives, they're getting the job done.

Several students on the roof are strapped into harnesses, helping lay metal rails where the panels will be secured. On the ground, Fresno State juniors Surinder Multani and Guramrit Gill, both in bright yellow shirts, hard hats and eye protectors, get ready to lift a panel to those above.

For Robertson, "This is the first time I'm wearing a hard hat, carrying solar panels, working with tools." But by giving with her heart and hands, Robertson says she hopes to extend a message of goodness and community.

"Downtown Fresno is still important and we still haven't forgotten about the people in the community who live here."

For 61-year-old Torres, a tiny woman standing just 4 feet 7 inches, this has been her home since the mid-1950s.

Torres is a special education assistant at Edison High School. She earns about \$900 a month, but pays around \$94 of that toward her monthly electric bill.

It doesn't take much to bring the bill up that high, she says, even though her home is only 700 square feet.

"This is a little house and I just have a little stove. I don't even cook. The heater is really small and I don't have any other appliances, so I'm going, why is it so much?" she says, standing inside her back porch on Tuesday.

Torres isn't a stranger to struggle. She is candid about her upbringing — a daughter of divorced parents, she flunked first grade and floundered through school. She went to Fresno City College, worked as a nurse's aide for a while, then found her way to Fresno State, her dream school. Now when she's not at work, she helps take care of her elderly father who lives next door.

On Tuesday, the installation was like finding an Easter egg early.

"With this," she said excitedly, jumping up and down and pointing up to the roof, "everybody says (my electric bill is) going to be lower."

Torres can expect her bill to drop drastically in the coming months, possibly to zero depending on how much Valley sun her new solar panels can capture.

With a sizzling summer on the way, Torres said she is grateful for the donated panels and students, because the lower energy costs will bring about a big change: "I'll be able to turn on the air conditioner."

Contact Hannah Furfaro: hfurfaro@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6412 or [@HannahFurfaro](https://twitter.com/HannahFurfaro) on Twitter.