MAKING A BIG IMPACT WITH TINY HOMES

Those who have supported and donated to Operation FINALLY HOME for the past 16 years have changed countless lives, including those of veterans, their families and community members nationwide. With the launch of a new partnership in Texas, donor gifts are not only contributing to new homes for veterans, they are also instilling the next generation of builders, contractors and tradesmen with an appreciation for the sacrifices those military veterans have made.

“We are seeing these young men and women giving back to the veterans in their communities and this program is giving them real-life training for careers in the skilled trades.”

— Rusty Carroll

Early this spring, Operation FINALLY HOME, Greater Houston Builders Association (GHBA) and Lowe’s partnered with construction trade programs at four Texas high schools to build tiny homes to be used as transitional housing for veterans. Operation FINALLY HOME, GHBA and Lowe’s are providing funding, construction materials and infrastructure support for students in these programs to build 20 tiny homes over the next three to five years.

“We are already seeing the benefits just a few months after joining in to support these trade programs,” said Rusty Carroll, Executive Director of Operation FINALLY HOME.

The students attending construction trade classes at Kingwood High School and Kingwood Park High School (Kingwood, Texas), Summer Creek High School (Houston) and Huntsville High School (Huntsville, Texas) have completed five houses thus far.

Early in the construction process, local veterans are surprised with news they will have temporary use of a tiny house. Then, as the building project is completed, the students have the opportunity to interact and work with the veterans on the finishing touches to the home. Before completion, the students leave “Notes of Love” - words of inspiration - on the interior of the homes, which are then wrapped in drywall, so the veterans feel the support each time they walk into their new homes.

The tiny homes are built on location at each school and then transported to local properties with the necessary infrastructure for multiple tiny homes, creating a supportive transitional housing community for veterans.

The Houston Chronicle interviewed some of the students and instructors earlier this year about the project and what it means to them to be able to support local veterans. Abigail Harrison, a student leader for the tiny home project at Summer Creek High School, made it clear that she and her fellow students understand the value of their work.

“It’s just been a really amazing experience to feel that you’re being a part of changing somebody’s life.”

— Abigail Harrison

Student at Summer Creek High School
A Few Words from Dan

Founding Operation FINALLY HOME and helping chart its course over the last 16 years has been an honor and a privilege. It’s been a learning experience filled with incredible joy each time we provide a veteran with the keys to a mortgage-free home or hear from them after their modification.

There have also been more than a few surprises along the way.

Although we didn’t initially plan to build Operation FINALLY HOME into an organization with a national impact, we were confident that builders, developers, and corporate sponsors would join us in our mission. We knew that we could find amazing and hardworking people to share in our work, and still others to volunteer their time and energy towards this cause.

What we didn’t foresee, and what has been the most incredible blessing for so many of our veterans, is the community created by the heroes themselves. When we hand over the keys to a mortgage-free home, the recipient of that home understands the blessing it is, and so we have seen time and time again our home recipients stepping up to help other families. They are taking their blessing and using the freedom it gives them to create blessings for others.

There have been countless Operation FINALLY HOME families at home dedications, surprises, and Note of Love events for other veterans. We’ve seen advice and support shared on our social media accounts and through letters, emails and phone calls. We’ve received photos and stories of our families hosting other families for Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

It is truly heartwarming to see these men and women who have sacrificed so much continue to give to others.

When I think back on our journey thus far, and how we aspire to evolve and grow in the years to come, I am reminded that fostering and supporting this community of veterans must remain a goal of ours.

Seeing this community of our veterans grow and become stronger has been a surprise - a truly humbling, gratifying and uplifting surprise.

God Bless,

Dan Wallrath
Founder of Operation FINALLY HOME

VETERANS HELPING VETERANS: ERIC KING

When U.S. Army Major Eric King was selected to receive a home from Operation FINALLY HOME in 2019, he thought of it as a blessing. Since then, he’s made it his mission to find ways to bless other veterans.

“That wasn’t just a game-changer for me, but a life-changer,” King said. “I was blessed with a home, but it opened up so many doors for me and my family. It allowed me to do things that I know I wouldn’t have been able to do if I’d had a mortgage.”

A native of Mariana, Arkansas, King enlisted in the U.S. Army to fulfill a lifelong dream of serving his country. He served for 16 years, including several combat tours—two to Iraq and one to Afghanistan—before being medically retired in 2016. A survivor of several Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks, ambushes and gunfights, King saw soldiers under his leadership critically wounded or killed and transitioned into civilian life laden with guilt and confused about his next steps.

It’s the kind of transition he wants to help other veterans avoid through his nonprofit, VetsWhatsNext.

“Operation FINALLY HOME gave me a home and inspired me,” King said. “I can no longer serve in uniform, but I can still serve the veterans who need the help I needed, who need the help to navigate a system to get the benefits, services and resources they need.”

King describes VetsWhatsNext as a “one-stop shop,” a central online hub and mobile app for veterans and family members seeking information about benefits, resources, employment opportunities and more. King hopes to eventually partner with the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to help service members transition into civilian life and provide the support and connection with other veterans they need. The nonprofit also participates in events that support these efforts, such as a suicide prevention walk/runathon, a leadership series with the Irving (Texas) Police Department, a “Keep a Veteran Warm” Christmas Giveback and more.

This fall, Vets WhatsNext will host their first annual scholarship golf tournament fundraiser. Set for Sept. 3, the tournament will fund an annual $4,000 scholarship available to dependents of disabled veterans enrolled at a two- or four-year university for up to four years.

No matter what the future holds, King is committed to his mission to serve veterans.

“When I die—and I hope that’s not any time soon—I hope I’ve built a legacy that lives long after me,” he said. “Operation FINALLY HOME and others gave back to me what I love so much: serving other people.”
SAFE AT HOME

An arctic blast barreled through Texas over Valentine’s Day weekend, during which temperatures plummeted and ice and snow blanketed the entire state, leaving millions of people without electricity. But the Kadleck family in The Woodlands, Texas, stayed safe and cozy in their home, a 2018 Operation FINALLY HOME build—and found plenty of ways to pass the time while their power was out.

“I have to share. We have been going through it here in South Texas and I have never been more thankful to have a safe, warm home! We were without power for 33 hours, but we were able to see just how amazing our home was built! Our builder (Beazer Homes) sprayed foam insulation and we really believe it saved us from any leaks and busted pipes! The house stayed in the high 50s and we were all ok!” — Erin Kadleck, wife of U.S. Army Sgt. John Kadleck
THANK YOU CAREGIVERS

MAY IS MONTH OF THE MILITARY CAREGIVER

Each May, more than five million caregivers are honored in the United States during Month of the Military Caregiver. Paying tribute to the people who care for more than two million veterans is an important part of supporting troops and military families.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, family caregivers spend over 24 hours a week providing care. Approximately 25% of these people will spend more than 40 hours each week providing care.

Below are some inspirational words from our very own home recipients.

“Don’t give up – Even when it means you are barely putting one foot in front of the other. Just keep going. Don’t forget to reach out, you don’t have to do this alone.
Caira Benson, wife of U.S. Army First Lieutenant Eric Benson”

“Always remember you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think and loved more than you know.
Claudia Sweger, wife of U.S. Army Sgt. Ronny D. Sweger”

“Don’t ever stop fighting for your veteran, but don’t forget to fight for yourself also. You are as worthy as your Veteran. That took me a long time to learn. I constantly fought for Jeremy. I never gave up and pushed for the best care for him. During that time, I put myself last when it came to everything, including my own mental health. So, please remember, you are worthy, too, YOU are important, too.
Tia Brooking, wife of U.S. Marine Corp Lance Cpl. Jeremy Brooking”

“Be prepared for the fact that your caregiver journey is always changing and evolving and embrace that. It can be frustrating when you get into a groove, but it’s also a new opportunity for you to experience a different side of this. It’s also a chance for you and your warrior to shine in very unique ways.
Jacqueline Goodrich, wife of U.S. Army Sgt. Michael Goodrich”

Military Caregiver Resources:
The Elizabeth Dole Foundation is the preeminent organization empowering, supporting, and honoring our nation’s 5.5 million military caregivers; the spouses, parents, family members, and friends who care for America’s wounded, ill, or injured veterans. For more information, visit elizabethdolefoundation.org

VA Caregiver Support Line: 1-855-260-3274
Operation Finally Home is with Caira Benson.

Everything we do leads up to this moment: When we can celebrate our heroes and say, “Welcome home!”

Thank you to everyone who joined us in leaving Notes of Love for U.S. Army SSG Stephen Netzley and his family! Special thanks to The Howard Hughes Corporation, Perry Homes, Greater Houston Builders Association (GHBA), the Houston Texans, and Bridgeland for making it possible.

We love seeing our Operation FINALLY HOME families coming together, helping celebrate groundbreakings and dedications with each other! We love this photo of Kadreck family at the recent groundbreaking for their new home.

One of the best parts about the Operation FINALLY HOME family is the way our veteran support and bless each other.

Congratulations on your new home! Thank you for your service!
From 1 military family to another.

Jenn & Mike S.

We’re so blessed to be part of such a wonderful community. Thank you for your commitment to our nation’s heroes!

Last week we joined Pulte Homes Built to Honor in breaking ground on the home for Army SGT. Javier Torres.
CONGRATULATIONS VICTOR SANSONE

Congratulations to friend and former Operation FINALLY HOME board member Victor Sansone, who was inducted into the 2020 Country Radio Hall of Fame. Sansone was instrumental in introducing Kix Brooks to Operation FINALLY HOME. Brooks helped surprise two combat veterans with mortgage-free homes during the CMA Music Festival in 2013 and has also performed at many International Builders Shows.

ALTERNAN CLAY SHOOT FUNDRAISER

Sheldon Trevino at the Alterman Clay Shoot Fundraiser in May.

CHESMAR HOME PROCEEDS BENEFIT OPERATION FINALLY HOME

The 2021 Greater Houston Builder’s Association Benefit Home in Lago Mar (Texas) was recently sold with proceeds going to Operation FINALLY Home and HomeAid Houston. The home was part of the Benefit Homes Project. This is Chesmar’s seventh Benefit Home in the charity’s 41-year history, raising more than $12 million dollars.

NASCAR AND MAXWELL HOUSE

Operation FINALLY HOME was featured on the JTG Daugherty Racing Maxwell House car which finished in the Top 30 at Richmond in April. Driver Ryan Preece and his dog, Memphis, gave us a sneak peak of the car featuring the Operation FINALLY HOME logo. Proceeds from the three Ryan Preece limited-edition digital collectibles went to Operation FINALLY HOME.

FINAL THOUGHT:

To everyone who was a part of the Notes of Love - Thank You.

Thank you all for all your kind words. From your “blessings to this home”, your “thanks for your service” even the “Go Navy, Beat Army” my family and I are beyond words in what this entire process means to us.

From day one, all your love and support has really shown through your actions. After walking through our future home last week, we were finally able to read your words and take it all in. Thank you all for the time you have taken out of your lives to share your words with us. We are forever grateful and appreciative of it all.

Although we weren’t able to thank everyone in person, I hope this message can make it to as many of you as possible. I was able to meet a few people there while doing the walk through. Having the Pulte family, sheriff deputies and some neighbors present were a blessing of its own. I am grateful for the opportunity to shake the hands of the men and women there and say thank you personally. Which is very hard to do these days.

I was able to spend some time with a couple of our neighbors shortly after the walk through, which was very welcoming to the community. They came by a little later than expected and were happy to write a few words in my presence. Reading each and every message was our goal that day - which we did.

That day was a day my family and I will talk about for the rest of our lives. We’ve been talking about it every day since. Your words are forever a part of our home and engraved in our hearts.

There’s no better experience we could ever ask for than what the Built To Honor and Operation FINALLY HOME has put together for us. You all know how to make a special moment even more special.

Thank You,

Javier Torres (Retired US Army)

Land O’Lakes, Fla.

Visit OperationFINALLYHOME.org or call 615-732-6143 to help a hero!