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# ‘Operation Finally Home’ comes to Wisconsin

## Part Two: Selecting recipients for Milwaukee area builds

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“To take advantage of it, I almost felt guilty,” said medically retired Green Beret John McCrillis of being granted an ‘Operation Finally Home’ (OFH) dwelling. “You see guys who need it more, who are in worse situations.”

McCrillis, a 30 year old married father of two daughters, sustained gunshot wounds in 2011 while serving in Afghanistan. He returned home to face a grueling recovery period where he was in “no condition” to provide for his family, he said. Receiving a home gave him hope and encouragement.

“After being injured you almost accept defeat because it’s such a mentally and physically draining process of recovery. That’s why this home was critically important to me,” he said. “It was a kick, to step forward in the right direction.”

Since 2005, OFH has built custom mortgage free homes across the nation for more than 60 wounded veterans and their families, with 65 more homes in the works. Now, for the first time, OFH is coming to Wisconsin.

### Creating Awareness

On June 11, 2015 a ribbon cutting on a pair of donated lots in Cranberry Creek Subdivision in Jackson inaugurated the project, promoting community awareness with hopes of garnering additional support. Two side-by-side homes will be constructed by builders Belman Homes, Inc. in Waukesha and Tim O’Brien Homes, Inc. in Pewaukee. Neumann Companies of Pewaukee provided the lots.

Other supporters include Renewal by Andersen Milwaukee, Metropolitan Builders Association and Wisconsin Builders Association. Building Component Manufacturers Conference is donating lumber and windows. Additional main sponsors are Westbury Bank, Dave Jones, Inc., Dave Droegkamp Heating and Cooling, Beaudry and Associates, and Drexel Building Supply.

Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch and other community leaders were on hand to lend support to the project. “Our veterans fight for all of our hopes and futures. It’s a great day when we can share back with them, hope and a future, right here in Wisconsin,” Kleefisch said.

Local OFH lead David Belman, president of Belman Homes, spoke of his gratefulness for community support. “I would like to personally thank the volunteers who have helped organize events, as well sponsors, suppliers, contractors and tradespeople who have generously stepped up to help make this project become a

reality,” he said.

OFH representatives were featured in Village of Jackson Community Parade during the city’s annual “Action in Jackson” festival on June 15, 2015.

### **Searching for soldiers**

As community supporters work to plan dual builds, national OFH is conducting a thorough search for wounded veterans in need of support.

Finding a recipient is more difficult than one would think.

“When the soldiers went into the military it was to serve others,” said Molly Halliday, OFH vice president of marketing. “To turn around and be on the receiving end is something they may have a hard time accepting.”

In fact, a recent OFH recipient insisted on conferring with his pastor to discern the acceptance of such a gift. The wounded veteran did not feel deserving of the home, Halliday said.

OFH’s national executive board is responsible for finding recipient families, said Daniel Vargas, OFH vice president of family matters and community outreach. “When we know a build is going to take place, we look for families who live in the area or are interested in coming back who could use a ‘hand up,’ with the support we provide,” Vargas said. The executive committee contacts U.S. Department of Defense, Veterans Administration, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, military hospitals and other military related organizations to aid in recipient search. An initial contact form is then sent. If this stage is passed, the veteran is asked to complete an application requiring extensive background information.

“The process is intense but very thorough so we can find families who really need help,” Vargas said. “We want to be sure the house will help and not hinder them.”

Dan Wallrath, OFH founder and chairman, echoed Vargas’ thoughts.

“The thing is, a new home doesn’t help everybody. Sometimes it can be an enabler in regards to something like substance abuse. We can’t get into counseling; we don’t have availability to do that,” Wallrath said. “We have to search out families for whom a new home enables them to move forward, despite their injuries and make something of their lives. Those are the special individuals we’re looking for.”

“We try to avoid getting families’ hopes up ... don’t want to disappoint anybody. They’ve been through a lot of physical and mental problems. We are very sensitive to that. We try to search out these families without them really knowing with covert investigation and needs assessments before we even get them involved.” OFH is close to identifying one Jackson home recipient and making progress with the second one.

McCrillis, of San Antonio, Texas, was ultimately chosen as a recipient because he was trying to get back on his feet and take care of his family, Vargas said. He had applied for local jobs but finally had to take a position out of state. Gone nearly 28 days each month, he rarely saw his family. “In our eyes, John was doing everything right to move forward,” Vargas said. “When he received a ‘hand up’ from OFH, he took it and ran with it.”

McCrillis does not disagree. “I wasn’t going to accept this home and sit back and never work a day in my life,” he said. A “stepping stone to grow,” the gift of a house has given him opportunity to take risks. He started his own business, allowing him to provide for his family. Recently, he was accepted into Brown University’s Resumed Undergraduate Education program where he will concentrate in business, entrepreneurship and organizations.

“I owe this to OFH,” McCrillis said. “I was able to focus on my growth...they supported me 100%. I wasn’t just a wounded combat veteran who was struggling. I was somebody with potential to succeed.”

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