

## Town Jumps on Board to Embrace a Marine

By JAMES DAO

March 26, 2012

GLASTONBURY, Conn. — Ask people in this Hartford suburb how the campaign to build “Manny’s house” went viral, and they may consult a spreadsheet or sketch a Venn diagram or two. Trust them when they say, “It’s complicated.”



But complicated is just one way to describe the story. How Manny’s house evolved from blueprint to concrete-and-plywood reality is also a tale of generosity, organized through countless human connections that might have once seemed utterly random but, in retrospect, are viewed in Glastonbury as weirdly, perhaps divinely, fated.

The short version goes like this: In mid-2010, Glastonbury decided to do something with the site of a fire-ravaged [Marine Corps League](#) post. With that mission in mind, the town manager, Richard Johnson, contacted Vicki Thomas, the Connecticut representative of [Purple Heart Homes](#), a nonprofit group that builds or refurbishes houses for disabled veterans.

Ms. Thomas, a self-proclaimed “child of the ’60s,” then went searching for a local disabled veteran to build a house for and found, through a chance encounter in late 2010, Cpl. Manny Jimenez of the Marine Corps, a native of New Britain who had lost an arm and much of his vision and hearing that year to a mine explosion in Afghanistan.



Not long after, the Rotary Club of Glastonbury was searching for a “hands on” charity project when Ms. Thomas and the founders of Purple Heart Homes, John Gallina and Dale Beatty, showed up looking for donations. The three of them left with commitments from club members to manage and help finance the entire construction project.

Many Town Council and Rotary Club meetings later, the wooden exterior of Corporal Jimenez’s 2,600-square-foot, three-bedroom house finally rose from its concrete foundation in a cacophony of pounding hammers and screeching saws over the weekend.

In the coming weeks, an army of volunteers will apply vinyl siding and roof shingles, install sinks and light switches, paint walls and lay flooring so that by the time Corporal Jimenez receives his medical discharge from the Marine Corps — in early June, he hopes — his new house will be in turnkey condition. It will also

be fully furnished, with details including a handmade wooden table in the dining room, stainless-steel appliances in the kitchen and a leather recliner in the living room.

Every stick of that furniture, as well as all the labor and nearly all the construction materials, will have been donated. On the market, the house would certainly sell for several hundreds of thousands of dollars. Corporal Jimenez will get it for \$1.

“I’m surprised by everything,” said Corporal Jimenez, a remarkably even-keeled 23-year-old who rarely looks surprised. “It’s not just a house. It’s an acceptance.” Of him, that is, by a town of 34,000 people.

Why, many have asked, has there been such an outpouring of support for a complete stranger? Susan Karp, who was chairwoman of the Town Council when it approved conveying the property to Purple Heart



Homes — which will convey it to Corporal Jimenez when he leaves the Marine Corps — articulated one common theory.

“Most of us don’t know people in the military,” she said. “This is our chance to help.”

Just how smoothly Corporal Jimenez, whose immigrant father died when Manny was a toddler, will settle into upscale Glastonbury will be a story for another day. But at a banquet for volunteers on Friday, 120 people at the Irish American Home gave Corporal Jimenez a long standing ovation.

Food for the event, provided by local restaurants, included sausage and peppers and roast beef. When Pat Low, a 70-year-old Glastonbury civic stalwart, realized that meat was on the menu and that many Catholics would not eat it on a Friday, she called her priest.

In a voice raspy from chain smoking Pall Malls, she pleaded for help. Within days, the Archdiocese of Hartford issued dispensation to Catholics on the project to eat meat that Friday.

“At that point, we said: God wants Manny in Glastonbury,” said Suzanne Galvin, who with Ms. Low and Ms. Karp spent hundreds of hours cajoling businesses to contribute, picking paint colors for the interior and organizing meals for volunteers.

The three women can attest to good fortune at several turns. For instance, they were at a Glastonbury restaurant not long ago when the president of the [Connecticut Construction Industries Association](#) overheard them talking about feeding more than 100 construction workers.

“I thought, ‘How come I don’t know about that?’ ” recalled the president, Don Shubert. After they illuminated him, the association wrote a check for \$5,000, and Mr. Shubert agreed to donate asphalt for the driveway.

Ed Quinn, a Rotary Club member who became the unofficial general contractor on the project, said a competitive fervor seemed to bring scores of volunteers knocking on his door to help build Manny’s house. By last week, more than 40 businesses were donating services or materials.

The founders of Purple Heart Homes, Mr. Beatty and Mr. Gallina, were friends in a National Guard unit from North Carolina when a roadside bomb wounded them in Iraq in 2004. Mr. Beatty lost his legs while Mr. Gallina suffered a head injury and ruptured disks in his back.

After a few years home, both found themselves disenchanted with their jobs and longing to do something for veterans.

“I wanted to build homes for people who would appreciate them,” said Mr. Gallina, 33, a contractor who had been building \$1 million homes in Statesville, N.C. He left his job, as did Mr. Beatty, also 33, who was a civilian contractor for the National Guard.

Born in 2008, Purple Heart Homes modifies homes to make them accessible for people with disabilities and has begun acquiring prefabricated homes for wounded veterans. All of its more than half a dozen projects have used donated materials or labor.

None had quite matched the scale of Manny’s house and its hundreds of volunteers, from middle school students who raised money and sewed throw pillows to grandmothers who baked pies.

William E. Keegan, a retired police lieutenant with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey who is president of Heart 9/11, a group that worked on the house, offered another theory of why so many people helped.

Mr. Keegan, who coordinated search and recovery efforts at the World Trade Center after the attacks, formed Heart 9/11 in 2007 to give rescue workers who lost colleagues on Sept. 11 a chance to use their skills to help others. With each project, members work through some of their own trauma and sense of loss, he said.

“Guys always ask me if it ever stops hurting, and I say, ‘It never stops hurting, but it does get better,’ ” Mr. Keegan said. Then he glanced at the men, and at least one woman, about 60 in all, who were driving nails, cutting lumber and raising walls.

“They always seem to know where to go to help,” he said.