



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MANNY JIMENEZ

Who is Manny Jimenez?

Residents and businesses rally to build home for disabled vet

by Nancy Thompson

For the past year, town officials, residents and business owners have been planning, negotiating and working to build a home for Manny Jimenez, a Marine corporal who was seriously injured while serving in Afghanistan. In a few weeks, the house will be finished and Jimenez, a 2007 graduate of New Britain High School, will move in.

So who is Manny Jimenez?

He has described himself as “just a normal guy.”

A “normal guy” who lost his left arm, hearing in his left ear and partial sight in his left eye when an improvised explosive device blew up near him when he was returning from a patrol in Afghanistan in

August 2010. A “normal guy” who has refused to let his injuries deter him from his goals, who runs marathons and competes in bicycle races and other athletic events throughout the country. A “normal guy” who has charmed everyone he’s met and inspired a community.

As a youth in New Britain, he enjoyed hanging out with friends in town and participating in National Bicycle League BMX races in Meriden. In high school, he volunteered at a local bike shop, the Recycle Bicycle Clinic, where he helped youngsters learn to build and fix bicycles. He also helped them with their homework and found ways for them to earn a bicy-

cle by doing volunteer work and staying out of trouble.

As a student at New Britain High School he played football as a freshman, ran cross-country as a senior and was a member of the wrestling team and Junior ROTC for four years.

He knew he wanted to enlist in the military and considered his options before deciding on the Marines.

“There was nothing fancy,” he said. “They didn’t offer me a bonus. I did it for the love of it. I liked the camaraderie, even after they get out. They just stick with each other like a family.”

He enlisted soon after graduation and was deployed overseas shortly after he completed training. He was injured during his second deployment, this time to Afghanistan.

“It was just like a normal day,” he said. “We went out on foot patrol and did our thing. An IED went off on our way back.”

Jimenez doesn’t remember anything about the explosion or its immediate aftermath. He regained consciousness in a hospital in Germany, then was transferred to the U.S.

He’s been undergoing rehabilita-

tion at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, for several months. His rehabilitation has included competing in triathlons, marathons and other events. He expects to be released from duty in a few weeks, at about the time his home will be completed.

He’s described the community’s efforts as humbling and inspiring.

“It’s amazing how they’ve come to help with this project,” he said. “Everyone has wanted to be part of it. It’s been very different from what’s portrayed in the media for returning veterans. Here, whatever you need, people are there for you.”

Rising from the ashes

Jimenez’s home on Addison Road is on the site of the old Marine Corps League building that was destroyed by fire in the summer of 2006. After the fire, Town Manager Richard Johnson talked with members.

“At first they were looking to rebuild, but they didn’t have the resources,” Johnson said. “There was a reverter clause that would turn the property back to the town if it wasn’t used by the Marine Corps League or for veterans’ purposes.”

He had heard of Purple Heart

Homes, a national organization founded by Dale Beatty and John Gallina, both wounded veterans, and called their director of communications, Vicki Thomas, who lives in Connecticut.

"At that point they didn't have a vet who wanted to live in the

Glastonbury area," Johnson said. "And then several months later Vicki called and said they had someone."

Thomas and Gallina attended a town council meeting last May to pitch the idea. After several months of discussion and consultation with

attorneys, an agreement to convey the property to Purple Heart Homes for \$1 was approved last November.

Once the home is finished, Purple Heart Homes will convey the property to Jimenez for \$1. The agreement stipulates how long he has to live there and the process by which

the town will reacquire the property if he decides to leave.

"Everyone hopes Manny will stay there for many, many years," Johnson said. "It's a great project and a great use of the land. It's been a lot of fun. Hopefully it's been a great experience for Manny. It's cer-

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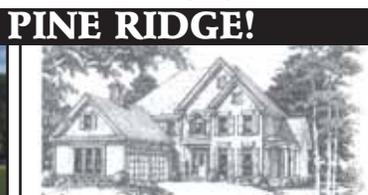
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tainly been a great experience for the town."

Members of the local Rotary Club decided to adopt the project after Gallina spoke at a meeting last fall.

"Vicki Thomas asked if John Gallina could speak to the club as part of his work to get support from various community organizations," said club President Kevin Flanagan. "By the end of it we wanted to wrap our arms around it and be responsi-

ble for it," he said. "We all decided this was it. We were looking for a project, and we got one."

The club has many business owners and tradesmen among its members, and all were eager to pitch in.

"We have everything we need to get things done. And it's not all ourselves," he said. "We've reached out to other sub-contractors, including competitors, and the contractors

have gone back to their people to get materials donated."

In addition to local businesses and residents, members of the Healing, Emergency, Aid Response 9/11 team, a group of veteran police officers, firefighters, construction trade union workers, surviving families of people killed on September 11, 2001, and others all spent a weekend in March framing and enclosing the house.

Craig Wellman and Ed Quinn have been coordinating the project, finding contractors and other volunteers to do whatever needs to be done. That part hasn't been hard.

"The toughest part now is that so many people want to help," Flanagan said. "How can you let one

person help and not another who offers? It's just people in the community reaching out to help. That's what it's all about."

Among the volunteers is Suzanne Galvin, co-owner of Sister Staging and a board member of the Glastonbury Education Foundation. She, too, was inspired after hearing Gallina and Beatty tell their personal stories.

"I was just so blown away from them," she said. "They're just so positive. So of course I got totally caught up in it. I offered to do colors," she said. "I ended up chairing the interior work and picking out toilets."

She said she's thrilled with the way the community has responded.

"The townspeople should know that they are not only affecting Manny's life, but also that they will be the model community that all others will be measured against."

— John Gallina, co-founder of Purple Heart Homes

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"I've never been so proud of our community," she said. "Everyone wants to do something. It's amazing how much time and effort all these businesses are putting into this. A couple of Walgreen employees happened to drive by the property while the H.E.A.R.T. 9/11 guys were working and came back with several cases of water for them. A little boy brought brownies for Manny because he wanted to meet him. He was in awe."

Like many others, she has met Jimenez and is looking forward to having him move to town.

"He's just so sweet," she said. "He's so unassuming and so overwhelmed by all this. Imaging being 23 and having all this happen to you starting with that horrible day in Afghanistan, and now he's picking out a bedroom set and colors for his home."

A first for Purple Heart Homes

Purple Heart Homes has overseen the renovation of several homes throughout the country, but this is the first that has been built from

the ground up.

Gallina appears to be as impressed with people in the community as they have been with him and his organization.

Asked if this kind of response is common, he said, "There is nothing common about Glastonbury. Personally, I believe it shows not only what is right with America, but it also crosses all political parties, generations and cultural lines."

He praised the local Rotary Club and the community as a whole.

"Glastonbury Rotary from the beginning has done a phenomenal job," he said. "The club epitomizes the values of service above self. I am honored to be acquainted with such fine Americans and proud for Purple Heart Homes to be associated with them all. The townspeople should know that they are not only affecting Manny's life, but also that they will be the model community that all others will be measured against."

What's next for Manny?

Eventually, Jimenez wants to go to



Glastonbury Rotarians Jeff Bodeau and Craig Wellman work on Manny Jimenez's future home.

PHOTO BY MARIA TRALONGO

college and study physical education or sports medicine. He's dealt with a lot of fame over the past few months and is ready to simply get on with life.

"I'm pretty much what you see, just a normal guy," he said. "I find a way to accomplish things. I don't use my injuries as an excuse not to do things. They didn't change the future, they just diverted it." **GL**



Gretchin Bade, PT, MLD/CDT, Cert. MDT (standing) and Teresa Boya (sitting).

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