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# Family

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## Home Is Where the Heart Is

Purple Heart Homes Restores Dignity and Independence to Aging and Disabled Veterans By Facilitating Safe, Accessible Housing

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## Home Is Where the Heart Is

Purple Heart Homes Restores Dignity and Independence to Aging and Disabled Veterans By Facilitating Safe, Accessible Housing

Disabled and aging veterans face unpredictable and often-agonizing challenges, especially when it comes to finding safe, affordable and accessible housing. A national nonprofit organization, Purple Heart Homes, was founded by veterans for veterans, and the organization focuses on addressing the unique housing challenges veterans face, including homes that have become unsafe or inaccessible over time.

Whether it's a new roof, installing wheelchair ramps, or mitigating mold, Purple Heart Homes is dedicated to ensuring that veterans can live safely and independently, restoring their dignity and hope. "Our purpose is to build awareness, mobilize communities and create safe housing solutions for our service-connected disabled veterans of all eras," explains John Gallina, chief executive and co-founder of Purple Heart Homes. "Our goal is for communities across our nation to take ownership and responsibility in supporting and serving our nation's veterans, putting action behind the words of, 'Thank you for your service.'"

"It is the people of our nation who reap the benefits of our veterans' service and sacrifice," he continues. "We believe that the people must be a part of the reintegration process and therefore have an active role in ensuring that service-connected disabled veterans have a healthy, safe and accessible home. We work each day to tell the stories of the veterans and the volunteers, the funders and the partners. We all have a why; we are all connected somehow to the mission, whether directly or indirectly, and we have all benefited from the service and sacrifice of the men and women who wear our nation's uniform. The old adage is still true today: it takes a village, and we are working to unite villages around our veterans."

The origin of Purple Heart Homes began when high-school buddies Gallina and co-founder Dale Beatty enlisted in the

North Carolina National Guard. Gallina and Beatty were deployed to Iraq in 2004, where both suffered combat injuries. Beatty was severely injured by an anti-tank mine, resulting in the loss of both legs below the knee. The pair turned their personal journey into a powerful mission, founding Purple Heart Homes in 2008 to help other veterans by building connections, restoring dignity, and empowering veterans from all eras to reclaim their independence and purpose.

"There were several profound moments that led to the founding of Purple Heart Homes," Gallina recalls. "First and probably most impactful after returning home injured was the realization of the need that Dale had as a double amputee; witnessing him crawl into his bathroom was heartbreaking. Being a small part of the larger community, coming together to support Dale and his family in building a forever home was the real match that lit the fire."

"There were several other factors as well," Gallina continues. "Dale drew inspiration from the Fisher House, (see *Family* cover story, Aug. 15, 2023) which had a profound impact on him during his hospital stay, bringing his family together to support his healing and recovery. For me, it was the Vietnam veterans; they were there when I first landed in Bangor, Maine. They were there supporting the construction of Dale's home, and I saw them standing on the side of the road holding homeless veteran signs driving home from work. We both wanted to give back, to pay it forward, and to know that we could still make a positive difference in the world even though we had been injured."

Since its founding, Purple Heart Homes has served nearly 4,000 veterans and more than 8,800 family members through projects across the country, from Alaska to Puerto Rico, and



everywhere in between. "Most of our projects are individual home renovations, critical home repairs, and new homes," Gallina relates. "In some cases, it's been through transitional housing projects or homeless shelter projects.

"One of the biggest lessons we have learned is that our work has a ripple effect, impacting not just the veteran but also those around them," he continues. "The families, the caregivers and even the neighbors benefit in many ways. While the veteran is regaining dignity and their freedom through something as simple as a ramp or a bathroom modification, the families and caregivers are no longer stressed mentally and physically; they, too, are regaining some freedom and peace of mind."

Gallina cites an example of veteran James Ellenburg, who served in the Korean DMZ in 1961 and 1962. "At the time, he was 83 years old and could only get in and out of his house once a week when his son-in-law could come over and carry him out the front door and down the steps of his home," Gallina notes. "By installing a ramp and widening the door to his home, he was able to go outside anytime he wanted. Often-times, we don't think about our home as becoming our prison, but for this veteran, that's exactly what it had become. The ripple effect was that his family could now come to visit for fellowship, and there was no longer a burden of lifting him and risking back injury."



Purple Heart Homes is funded through private donations, foundations, and corporate sponsors. Eligibility for the program is based on veterans' service-connected disability status; the organization also serves veterans over the age of 60 who have a disability and received an honorable discharge. Eligible veterans must also pass a criminal background check and show proof of current mortgage or homeownership. Applications are processed on a first-come, first-served basis, with priority given to veterans over the age of 60. Information and applications are available on the Purple Heart Homes website, [www.purplehearthomesusa.org/](http://www.purplehearthomesusa.org/)



Gallina points out that veterans and their families face unique challenges returning to civilian life, including reintegration, home ownership and job placement. "Purple Heart Homes focuses on these areas by engaging local volunteers, businesses and community-minded organizations," he explains. "The results are relationships that are developed between the veterans and the community, exposing the veteran and the family members to additional support systems and networks to help address other gaps and needs beyond the home.

"If we are stressed about our home or feel unable to care for our family, it's hard to focus and be successful in anything else," Gallina adds. "When the stresses of war are compounded with the stresses of the home and feelings of inadequacy, it often leads to depression and thoughts of suicide, or worse, attempts at suicide. When we come together as a community and serve a veteran, they see actions behind our words of gratitude for their service, which encourages them to continue and fight another day. Our work at Purple Heart Homes is doing so much more than providing healthy, safe, and accessible housing; truly, we are healing hearts one home at a time."



## Veterans Helping Veterans

Purple Heart Homes is dedicated to helping veterans achieve independence and a good quality of life. CEO and co-founder John Gallina relates the story of one Army veteran, Debra Farley, who served during the Cold War and was honorably discharged.

"Debra was laid off just as the pandemic began in 2020," he explains. "Debra had been living in an apartment and saving her money for a down payment on a home when she learned that her rent was going to be increasing beyond what she could afford, and soon found herself homeless. In late spring of 2020, Debra was diagnosed with breast cancer and began treatments. Our local Purple Heart Homes chapter learned about Debra's story and reached out to me to see what we could do to help.

"When we met her, she owned a small piece of land, like many veterans, but she was unable to secure a loan for a home," Gallina continues. "At that time, Purple Heart Homes had just started manufacturing 320-square-foot, one-bedroom, one-bath homes with efficiency kitchens, so we organized our partners and funders to build Debra a small home.

"Today, Debra is thriving in that very same home, has earned a degree, and is working a full-time job while serving and giving back in her community," Gallina enthuses. "Debra is special but not unique; she is one example of the many veterans that Purple Heart Homes serves. They all have a servant's heart, they just need to be supported, and time after time we see them step up to get involved and continue to serve themselves once they are stabilized and provided the tools, they need to be successful at home."

