

# Remaking home: Building Dreams for Marines

*"Empathy has no script. There is no right or wrong way to do it. It's simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting and communicating that incredibly healing message 'You are not alone.'"*  
— Anonymous



D. QUINCY WHITNEY

Last night's fireworks are a potent reminder that freedom is not free. We owe much to those willing to fight for our freedom. My father always felt especially beholden to his Marine Corps comrades, more so because of circumstances he never quite understood. On the night before his platoon was shipping out – the unknown destination: Iwo Jima – my father and one other Marine were plucked from the ranks and told they had different orders – to serve the next 18 months as Parris Island rifle instructors. I think he always felt a special responsibility to make the most of his life because of the sacrifices made at Iwo Jima.

My father often told the story of how he became a Marine. Sometime in 1942, he was one of many Dartmouth College freshmen caught in their tracks by a stirring speech given by President Hopkins. As a result, in July 1943, Hanover, New Hampshire, and Dartmouth College became the host for the V-12 Naval Training program. When asked why he picked the Marines, my father always said: "I wanted the very best on either side of me."

I think what he meant goes beyond physical and mental training. He wanted to be surrounded by troops who lived and breathed the loyalty mantra. He trusted "Semper Parati." My husband who became a Marine officer, chose the marines for the same reason.

Semper Parati expresses the constellation of a Marine platoon – a group of disparate individuals who form a unit that soon become family. When service ends, the transition back from that platoon, into society and one's family, is often fraught with incomprehensible challenges that are often difficult to put into words. Emotional and

mental challenges are compounded if a veteran has suffered a disability that makes daily life – and mobility – difficult.

Home is where the heart is – and the door jam, the countertop, the cupboards, the hallway – all normally easy to navigate unless a disability makes home seem like an obstacle course. Is there an organization that helps disabled Marines and Navy corpsmen adapt their home surroundings to make daily life easier?

The answer is yes – thanks to the generosity and determination of two people trying to help Marine veterans – Brian Hooper, a Merrimack building contractor, and Gwen Krailo, of Nashua, mother of a former Marine. In 2012, Hooper and Krailo created Dreams for Marines, an unlikely nonprofit that was the result of a merger between need and opportunity.

In 2011, after volunteering for several years with Toys for Tots, Hooper was invited to the annual Marine Corps Birthday Gala. He met many marines there and one Marine mentioned his disappointment that a buddy, a fellow Marine, could not attend. When Hooper asked why, the Marine explained that his buddy did not have a ramp for his wheelchair. "That evening we went and picked up this Marine at his house and brought him to the Gala. I offered to build him a ramp right then and there – without really thinking where that might lead," Hooper said.

The University of Notre Dame in its study on the "science of generosity" defines it this way: "Generosity is therefore not a random idea or haphazard behavior but rather, in its



Photo courtesy of DREAMS FOR MARINES

Dreams for Marines volunteers at work on a recent project.

mature form, a basic, personal, moral orientation to life... a learned character trait that involves both attitude and action."

Hooper merged his attitude with action – asking Krailo, then working as a Family Readiness Program coordinator for the Bravo Company located in Manchester – to help him start a nonprofit organization to renovate living spaces for disabled Marines and Navy corpsmen. Krailo agreed and she and Hooper contacted Bernie Ruchin. Krailo became secretary; Hooper, vice president; and Bernie, the president.

"For the first few years, we did two-three projects a year, based on my calling in favors from contacts of mine in the business. They would quote me one sum for a job, and then often find that they wanted to contribute to the cause so they would end up donating a portion of the job. Now we work with contractors anywhere in the state, trying to find a local contractor. We have since completed about 14 jobs – approximately two-three a year."

BDFM built a new

stairwell to the basement woodshop for Marine Staff Sgt. Edward Dennell. They worked with building contractor Community House Calls to renovate an entryway, raise a porch floor, remodel the kitchen, and add a new set of stairs to a new deck to help Cpl. Anthony Romano navigate his home in his electric wheelchair. For Sgt. Ron Albert, BDFM worked with E5 Builders and E5 Manager Jake LaRoche, a former Marine, to enlarge a doorway to accommodate a wheelchair and add a handicap-accessible shower.

The newest BDFM job will aid Marine Cpl. David Waniski of Gilmanton Ironworks, New Hampshire, an Honorably discharged Marine who lost a lung in Iraq, with new front and back steps for mobility issues and a central AC installation as his lung issue causes breathing difficulty in summer months.

Building Dreams for Marines is totally nonprofit volunteer-run organization, with 4 percent of the budget going to expenses and 96 percent going back to renovation projects at no

cost to the veteran. BDFM welcomes volunteers and collaborates with contractors all over the state.

Up until recently, the focus and mission of Dreams for Marines has been exclusively home renovations. But BDFM is actively working on a more "mobile" aspect of its mission – by collaborating with Mobility Works of Manchester, to modify vehicles to accommodate disabilities marine vets have incurred either in the line of duty or otherwise.

One of the surprising joys for Hooper has been seeing how Building Dreams For Marines has grown – not only in who they service, but in growing fundraising efforts. The annual Building Dreams For Marines golf tournament combined with the Traders for a Cause Gala raises \$40,000 annually – enough to sponsor two or three contracting renovations for Marines in need.

When asked about why Dreams for Marines serves Marines exclusively, and not other veterans in other services, Hooper gets philosophi-

cal. "I would like nothing better than to create a playbook for others to start similar organizations for other branches of the service. Right now, we have a gung-ho Marine building contractor in Massachusetts, so maybe he can create a Massachusetts chapter of Building Dreams for Marines – that would be ideal. It's a lot of work, but it's worth it."

Building Dreams For Marines exemplifies empathy – they listen, they hold space without judgment, they connect emotionally and put attitude into action to give Marines the gift of movement – and movement means personal freedom for those who gave so much to procure freedom for others. Carol Welch said it best: "Movement is a medicine for creating change in a person's physical, emotional and mental state." For more information on Building Dreams For Marines, see [www.bdfm.org](http://www.bdfm.org).

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