

VFW Warriors; Wounded Warrior Home Makeover

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — At a time when rest, relaxation and rehabilitation should be at the forefront of one's concerns, Jeremiah Johnson was still trying to understand the sequence of events that had just turned his life upside down.

Johnson, a sergeant serving in the U.S. Army, was on his second tour of Iraq when his career as an infantryman was cut short by wounds sustained on mounted patrol.

While Johnson was standing next to his armor-reinforced humvee, a RPG hit just three feet from his position, nearly severing his right leg. After a grueling surgery to reattach his leg, followed by painful rehabilitation, he was finally released from the Ft. Carson Warrior Transition Unit and made his way home to Colorado Springs, Colo.

When he arrived home, Johnson made a shocking discovery. His wife, deciding that she couldn't "accommodate" his injuries, had left him, and had taken nearly all of their belongings with her, leaving behind only a dresser, a mattress, and Johnson's three-year-old son's race car bed frame. To make matters worse the house had been sorely neglected and the structure had seriously deteriorated.

"It's fair to say I was pretty upset when I saw the condition of my house. My kid was living in terrible conditions while I was overseas serving my country," reflects Johnson, now a single father.

Severe water damage in both bathrooms caused the drywall to rot, tile to crumble, and the subflooring to weaken considerably. Only one faucet in the house was functional, as was the case for the toilets. Gaping holes peppered the walls and doors - those that hadn't been ripped from their hinges. The hot water heater was collapsing, and there wasn't a speck of living green grass on the area Johnson used to call his lawn.

When Scott Riebel, a member of VFW Post 101 and Vice President of the Colorado District 5 VFW Warriors motorcycle organization, received a call to help Johnson, he didn't hesitate. "You never leave a fallen comrade behind; that carries over into civilian life," said Riebel.

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The next day, he and other VFW Warriors out of VFW Post 101 and Post 3917 headed to Johnson's home to survey the damage and gauge the amount of work needed. Once inside, it didn't take long before the crew realized they were going to need the support of the community to tackle this project.

February 28, 2009, would mark the project's start date, giving Riebel and his team only two weeks to complete the renovation. They immediately began reaching out to the local community, and with the help of Duraclean the work began. "We went really wild," Riebel chuckled, "we retiled the kitchen floor, kitchen countertops, backsplash, fireplace, fixed the flooring..."

Though they were all strangers to Johnson, more than one hundred volunteers, including fellow service members out of Ft. Carson, turned out to lend a hand. Local businesses donated everything from new kitchen appliances and sod, to food and drinks for the volunteers. Additionally, a furniture store in Denver donated all new furniture to go along with the refurbished interior, Champion Windows donated all new windows, and Home Depot donated a new riding lawn mower. It has been estimated that more than 1,000 hours of volunteer labor and roughly \$15,000 in donations went to the project.

The renovations were completed on schedule and the home was turned back over to Johnson and his son on March 15. "[Johnson's son] was so excited when he saw his new Spider-man themed room that he ran up and karate kicked the wall. Thankfully, he didn't damage it!" laughed Riebel.

"When I got back to the house after it was finished, I couldn't believe it. It didn't feel real. It was like I was at a hotel or something!" recalls Johnson.

Johnson can now focus on getting a little R&R and though he still has a long rehabilitation ahead of him, life has been made a little easier thanks to a group of VFW members and his stand-up community. Now, he and his son are looking forward to making their new house a home.

Click [here](#) to listen to the home makeover interview on VFW's The National Defense