New Generation, Old Tradition

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By Bob Kerr
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It's like the tent, the Providence tent, the one where the Marines from the 6th Motor Transit Battalion would gather when they weren't out driving along the treacherous roads of Iraq.

"We just want to get everybody back in the tent," said Tim Galuza.

Galuza and his friend Garry Crum once went 45 days without a real shower, which is the kind of thing that friends who go to war together can talk about and most other people can't.

Now, with two tours in Iraq behind them, they are back in Providence trying to do something that seems so right for its time and its place. They are picking up where other veterans left off. They are putting up that "tent" at Potters Avenue and Dexter Street.

"Me and my guys would meet up once a month or so," said Crum. "And we wanted to have a place of our own."

They contacted the Veterans of Foreign Wars to see what they needed to do to establish a post. They were told they needed a minimum of 25 members. They called the guys they'd served with in their Providence-based reserve unit. Some are from Rhode Island, some from Massachusetts and Connecticut.

They also needed a post, a building where they could meet and decide on their new mission. The VFW pointed the way to Potters and Dexter.

It's a good thing they'd been Marines. A lot of people would have looked at the building, walked inside and up the back stairs and decided it was too late.

The building had been the Sylvester S. Payne Post at one time, but it hadn't been much of anything for years. The veterans found condoms and beer bottles and furniture no one would want to sit on. They found trash. They found too much evidence that people had been breaking in and dishonoring what had been there before.

So they cleaned it up. Members of the battalion, their wives and kids came and hauled things out, scrubbed things down and started painting. The post-in-the-making became the subject of one of Walt Buteau's fine "Street Stories" on Channel 12.

And Judith Fortes, Crum's mother, started making some calls.

Fortes had the usual tough time a mother has when her son is at war and she has to deal with the daily uncertainty. Now that he is back, she has seen the signs. Her son needs a place to be with those who understand where he's been.

"He doesn't talk much about the war at home," said Fortes. "He needs to get together with his comrades."

Fortes is calling anyone she thinks can help provide what's needed. She makes a basic pitch: "My son has a VFW post he's trying to open and get running."

She opens her notebook on a pool table in the main second-floor room that is starting to look as it's supposed to. She lists the companies that have been generous: Builders Surplus, Venture Window, Pittsburgh and Sherwin-Williams Paint, Lowe's, JT's Lumber, SDS Disposal, Up North Records ...

"I find a lot of people have kids in the service," said Fortes.

As materials, such as windows and doors, come in, Galuza goes to work. He is a carpenter and has been invaluable in making things fit.

"I just paint it and caulk it," said Crum. "He puts it in."

When it's done, it will be the David W. Forgue Post, named after a buddy killed in a car accident after he got home.

It is a long process. There is a lot of work to do, and not a lot of money. People who have been going to war don't tend to have fat bank accounts. So there is the need to ask, to make those phone calls. The veterans need a certificate of occupancy before they can hold fundraisers in the building, and they have to get a lot of costly work done before they can get the certificate.

They need help. They need electrical and plumbing and paving help. They need people to come and see what they're doing.

Check it out. Look for the red, white and blue building at Potters and Dexter, the one with the red, white and blue bunting hanging from the windows. Consider the possibilities. This could be one of those wonderful projects that helps veterans come home and at the same time strengthens the community where they choose to settle in. Crum and Galuza are already talking about children's programs at the post.

And Galuza says his wife is planning to hold his 30th birthday party there in September.

You don't have to be a veteran to be part of this. You just have to appreciate what it's all about.

You can call Judith Fortes at (401) 943-7942 or go to Post12095.com.