

Veterans Helping Veterans on Reality TV Show

A wounded Iraq War veteran and his family were the surprised recipients of a home makeover, and his fellow VFW members pitched in to help

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Randy Engness took eight days of vacation at the end of September to help a family he had never met. As commander of VFW Post 2204 in Rice Lake, Wis., Engness learned at the Wojcik family in Strum, Wis., about an hour away. They were going to be featured on the Lifetime Network's Military Makeover with Montel.

During a typical season, the television show helps six veterans and their families by renovating their homes. However, the show's success relies, in part, on donations from businesses and volunteers' help.

"I heard about this opportunity at our VFW District meeting," Engness said. "They were in need of skilled and general labor. Having done electrical work for eight years in the past, I decided to volunteer for this."

Engness worked 10 days straight at the Wojcik home and put in more than 100 hours of labor, plus another 22 hours of driving back and forth. Some nights he was too tired to make the drive home and put himself up in a hotel.

Running new electrical circuits, changing out light fixtures, switches and outlets were just some of the duties Engness fulfilled. He said while it was interesting to see what reality TV is really like, it was hard to get a lot accomplished during filming.

"It felt good to help a fellow veteran and his family," said Engness, who served in the Navy from 1983-89. "Through this experience of coming together with other volunteers to work for a common goal, I was rewarded with making many new friends and tight bonds with fellow veterans."

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And Engness wasn't alone. According to Terri Wojcik, the wife of veteran Steve Wojcik, they were told by the show's producers that their project was the first to have such an amazing turnout of volunteers.

"Everybody in Strum helps each other out," said Terri, a mom of three daughters. "Everyone knows each other or knows of each other. We were told that the show has never had so many volunteers, but especially skilled volunteers."

Post 6550 Commander Steve Ebert and Sr. Vice Commander Jerry Knudtson were two of the Strum VFW volunteers on site.

"It was a great honor to do this for Steve with everything he went through," Ebert said. "A lot of us members showed up from around the state to help."

Knudtson said the Post has just a little over 100 members so it was good to see so many show up.

"Steve's a very humble guy and doesn't like a lot of attention on himself," Knudtson said, adding that the Military Makeover honoree also is a VFW member at Post 6550.

'Die-Hard' Packers Fans

When Steve, Terri and their daughters — Alyca, 19; Amberlee, 16; and Alyson, 13 — moved out of their home and relocated to a campground for 10 days, they had no idea what to expect upon their return.

Led by J-Dog Junk Removal, volunteers showed up to remove everything from the home so the remodel could begin.

After the family found out they had been chosen for the show, they were asked to do online surveys about their preferences. And days before the Wojciks temporarily left their home, show hosts Jennifer Bertrand and Art Edmonds came out to do a walk-through with the family.

While a new roof and siding was installed and walls were being knocked down and put back up again at the Wojcik residence, the family was treated to several surprises.

Self-proclaimed "die-hard" Green Bay Packers fans, the Wojcik family was given a personal tour of Lambeau Field and presented tickets to a game. Steve said he has season tickets through his grandmother, Janet Kelly, but it's only four tickets, which means someone gets left behind.

“It’s always a no-win choice as to who goes to the game,” said Steve, who served in the Marine Corps from 1994-98 and later with the Army Reserve in Iraq. “To be able to go to a Packers game with Terri and all the girls was another memory that will last a lifetime. This was the first time I was able to take a tour. To be on the field and touch the ‘Frozen Tundra’ (a nickname for the field’s turf), that should be on every Packer fans’ bucket list.”

Before the game, the family was at Anduzzi’s Sports Club, where former Green Bay Packer Gilbert Brown surprised them by taking their order. Brown invited the Wojciks to his tailgate party where Steve was recognized on stage for his military service.

Outpouring of Gifts

Another surprise, Terri and daughters were flown to Norfolk, Va., for a weekend shopping spree at Simon Premium Outlets. Not only did Under Armour provide gift cards for shopping, Terri said, the sports apparel company also stocked their closets with apparel before the family returned to their remodeled home.

Steve received a new crossbow for hunting from Barnett Crossbows and also a year’s membership to Planet Fitness. And Edvest gave the family \$10,000 to invest in their children’s higher education needs.

At a ceremony at the nearby Highgrounds Veterans Memorial Park in Neillsville, Wis., it was announced that Fairway Independent Mortgage provided a service animal to Steve, who was wounded by an IED on Sept. 6, 2004, near Baghdad. (It will take some time before Steve receives his service animal.)

The Highgrounds ceremony was to dedicate a stone to 21-year-old Devin Grella from Medina, Ohio. Grella was a friend of Steve’s who served alongside him in Iraq with the 706th Transportation Company from Mansfield, Ohio, and was killed in the same IED blast that wounded Steve.

Terri said when Steve came home from Iraq, he started drinking a lot and became isolated, not wanting to talk or even drive.

It stemmed from the loss of Grella as much as his own wounds, which cause him severe back, shoulder and neck pain to this day.

“I would be lying if I said I hadn’t contemplated suicide,” Steve told Montel Williams during the taping of Military Makeover with Montel.

Steve, who is a Wisconsin State Trooper, had two spinal fusion procedures in 2017 to help with his pain.

“We have been very blessed by my husband being able to come back from war,” Terri said.

‘Once-in-a-Lifetime Opportunity’

When the family returned to their home on Oct. 3, they were overwhelmed by what they found.

“My reaction was ‘Oh my gosh, it’s clean,’ ” Terri said and laughed. “As a family of five with two dogs, our house is definitely lived in. My favorite part of the remodel is the hallway closet. Everyone who worked on the home signed inside the closet with a Sharpie.”

For Steve, the best part of the home reveal was his family’s reaction to it all.

“Watching their faces while they walked around the house was the best,” Steve said. “Those are the priceless memories I will take from this wonderful gift my family has received.”

Terri said a veteran helping with the remodel later told her that he was able to work through his own problems just by helping.

“This has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Terri said. “But we don’t live our lives with the anticipation of getting what we did. We just live our lives to do good unto others.”

Steve said while some may find it odd, his favorite surprise was having Nexen Tires donate winter and summer tires for all of the family vehicles.

“Knowing how important good tires are during inclement weather, it really puts my mind at ease knowing my girls have great tires on their vehicles,” Steve said.

Military Makeover Cast Veterans

For Williams, who spent 22 years in the military, the best part of hosting Military Makeover is meeting with veterans and their families.

“In the end, it is all about families and spending time with the families,” said Williams, who has been with the show since 2018. “We have a bond and shared experiences. Just spending time talking is what I treasure.”

Williams said that he may have retired from the Navy, but that he never took off his uniform. He said that helping military families isn’t optional for those who have served. It’s expected.

“For me, Military Makeover began in earnest while I was in the hospital recovering from a

stroke,” said Williams, who enlisted in the Marines and served from 1974-76, before getting accepted into the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. “I signed the contract in the hospital, and getting to host this show was one of the many things that motivated me to push so hard in my recovery. I saw the show as an opportunity to not only help military families but inspire others to do the same.”

Another cast member and military veteran is World Wrestling Entertainment superstar Lacey Evans, a former Marine Corps sergeant who was based at Parris Island, S.C.

Evans said that as a veteran, she jumped at the opportunity to be part of Military Makeover.

“It means everything to me,” Evans said. “I know firsthand not just what the veteran goes through, but the family as well. The family serves, and it motivates me to do as much as I can.”

If you want to watch the transformation of the Wojcik home, visit militarymakeover.tv or brandstar.tv.

This article is featured in the February 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.