



Vets Helping Vets

**"THIS PLACE SAVED MY LIFE."
WHEN A YOUNG MAN BARES
HIS SOUL AND HAS THE
COURAGE TO MAKE THAT
STATEMENT TO A TOTAL
STRANGER, ONE BEGINS
TO REALIZE THE DEPTH
OF HIS CONVICTIONS.**

by Beth A. Birmingham

For veteran paratrooper Nicholas, who fought in Afghanistan, the Garry Owen House in Searsmont was his long sought-after sanctuary. Little did he know, after living homeless under a San Diego bridge for three years, that his life's journey would actually come to a new beginning in Maine.

The Garry Owen House opened in 2016 and is a combined effort of the Garry Owen Motorcycle Club and the Board of Directors of the house.

Senior veterans Warren Ard, president of the MC, and Dana Philippi, president of the OH Board, have heard all too many stories like Nicholas'.

Philippi had just checked in two new residents the day before our visit on Oct. 4. "Winter is coming, so those numbers will grow," he said.

The house, which was leased to

Ard in 2016 by John McCafferty, has a note of \$50,000 due by November 2020. The nonprofit pays no rent, but is responsible for maintenance, insurance coverage and property taxes. It presently houses six veterans comfortably, but could accommodate a couple more.

Ard said the motorcycle club created the house as the result of an idea formulated by three or four veterans who were riding together. They came across some homeless veterans. "They had nowhere to go," he said, "So, as one veteran helping another veteran, we decided to see what contacts there are to get them help."

"But," said Ard, "There were no avenues for help ... especially for veterans with post traumatic stress disorder. Other places that would take the veterans in would take their

Left: Garry Owen House: Brotherhood
—Members of the Garry Owen House
and Motorcycle Club along with some
resident veterans.

disability pay.” Then, looking further into things, he found there were veterans who did have homes but could not afford to heat them. Now the organization provides heating oil to fellow veterans from Searsmont to Fort Kent.

“If they need help, we help them,” Ard said, explaining the Garry Owen MC took over and got the “house” going. “Without us, these veterans wouldn’t even be here,” he said. It took only 12 days of intense work for the group to transform the former Apple Squeeze on Route 3 into a habitable residence for homeless veterans.

“It takes money to run it,” Ard said, explaining there is not a veteran in the house who pays a cent. It’s all provided by donation.

Alex Allmayer-Beck, past director of the Garry Owen House and retired social worker, said it’s very difficult to find affordable housing, and most landlords want credit references. “For somebody who has been living under a bridge for three years, they’re not going to have a credit score,” he said.

“The political storm that we have today ... there’s a divide there that, in my opinion, is not right,” Ard said. “When we take people that have served this country, who gave us the rights that me and you have today, and push them aside and start supporting people who have never done anything for this country ... it’s just not right.”

Beck said most veterans who have come out of combat have PTSD. He said anyone presenting with those symptoms is sent to a psychiatrist, and

if diagnosed, lose their 2nd Amendment rights, meaning they cannot possess a weapon or even hunt.

“That’s why a lot of veterans are not going to the VA and saying they have nightmares and stuff like that, because they immediately lose their right to go hunting,” Beck said.

One veteran said the police are on high alert when they see a veteran’s license plate — specifically with a purple heart symbol on it. “They make an assumption that you’re armed and dangerous,” veteran Jim Booth said.

MC Treasurer Gene Kelly said the group’s mantra is “No brother left behind,” adding that any veteran who has a clean bill of discharge is welcome to the house. “They just basically fell through the cracks, and we give them the opportunity to get themselves back into society and be productive.”

Besides a roof over their head, a hot meal and a place to sleep, the group also provides a case manager and a connection with the VA. “We help give them a solid foundation so they can move on and possibly help some other vets,” Kelly said.

“A diagnosis of PTSD has a stigma that one will be violent toward others,

void, and filled it.”

“We’re doing it on the help of the good people of the state of Maine,” he said. He added that Maine has more veterans per capita than any other state. “Maine people care for their veterans 100 percent,” Ard said, adding that a veteran rings a place in a Mainer’s heart.

The house does not take any state or federal funding; it’s all funded by donations.

“When you have some really burly looking, Harley-driving guys who ask for funding, it’s amazing how much we really get,” Ard said, laughing. “They just understand.”

Ard told of an incident at a local fair where someone wanted to burn an American flag, and instead of the instigators being reprimanded, the MC was kicked out for trying to stop the incident. Beck said the only blemish on his soul was defending the burning of an American flag.

Kelly said the combined organizations are reaching out to the community to raise the \$50,000 to keep the place flourishing.

Nicholas spent 11 months at the house, the most time by any veteran thus far. He had been through

“They just basically fell through the cracks, and we give them the opportunity to get themselves back into society and be productive.” — Gene Kelly

but the reality is that one will be violent toward themselves ... each case is so different,” Beck said.

Ard said the motorcycle group is known as a bunch of vagabonds ... “that got together after seeing a

numerous programs from San Diego to Maine, but said, “This place is something special. It’s a hell of a lot more therapeutic than any of the other programs I’ve been through.”

He explained that the program’s



success comes from the veterans' being able to police themselves, along with the constant supervision from

the board and the club members. "It's really nice to connect with people who are/were struggling with similar situations as I was," Nicholas said.

He was a transplant from San Diego, then moved to Eugene, Ore, where he felt veterans were not given a fair shake.

"I came here, and it would not have worked out had I not found this place," he said, adding that he was able to network, get the necessary treatment, and has paid off his debt and found a place to live. "I'm debt-free today," he said. "This is the most stable I've been in my entire life," Nicholas said.

Fellow veteran, Tom, agreed. "Literally, this place saved my life."

Tom had returned to Maine from Florida, to help his son and family. After purchasing a piece of property and building a cabin, Tom realized he

needed a place of his own. So he began the process of building a space for himself and quickly found that "time and money were just not on my side."

At that point, Tom said, he moved from his 10x10-foot unheated cabin to his van, which presented a whole new experience for him. Then he came across a telephone number on a community board. It was for a case worker in Ellsworth who directed him to the Garry Owen House.

"I was hesitant, and flat-out refused," Tom said, explaining that his pride was getting in the way. He used to be an advocate for low-income people in Maine and worked at the Greater Bangor Area Shelter for many years. "I would intake people. I would give them meals and a bed and listen to their stories," he said. "I would make them feel as comfortable as I could."

"Now I found myself on the other end of that stick, and these guys came to my rescue," he said. "When I came through that door, I was damn near dead."

Beck said Tom wasn't making any sense when he first arrived at OH. He was delirious and in the second stage of hypothermia, and his blood sugar levels were critically low. "This place brought me back," Tom said.

That was in January of 2017. Tom stayed at the house through May, worked with Beck and was assigned a case worker at Preble Street in Portland. "Liz Frank was her name — an angel," he said. Together they worked on his placement at Bar Harbor Housing Authority. He said from there, the Patriot Riders came to his rescue — providing him with the household items he needed to start over.

"These folks here provide a service that is very much needed," Tom said. "There is a void. Without these folks I would not be sitting here — it's just that cut and dried."

Ard said the group is known at Togus as the "outlaw shelter to veterans," because they don't have to follow state or federal regulations. "We work on the Good Samaritan Law of Maine," he said, explaining that as long as they do not charge any



PHOTO: BETH A. BIRMINGHAM



veteran for their services, they do not have to be licensed as a shelter.

At any other shelter, such as Preble Street or the one in Bangor, a veteran gets checked in at 4 p.m. but is back out on the street by 8 a.m. the next morning. "Here, you're here until you get your stuff together," he said.

Tom also said other shelters have a variety of barriers, whereas the Garry Owen House has a simple set of rules — no alcohol, no substance of any kind, and one is expected to be an upstanding member of the community.

"This is a one-of-a-kind place," Nicholas said, adding, "They've helped me more than all the other places put together. There's just something about being able to connect with other veterans ... there's a therapeutic value of working through these issues as a team rather than feeling you're alone."

Beck said that he and Philippi do

Left: (From left) Alex Bower, Road Captain of the Mother Club Motorcycle group; Warren Ard, President of the Garry Owen Motorcycle Club; and resident Lt. Ramirez holds Diego while they share stories and support at the Garry Owen House.

Right: Veteran Nicholas, a past resident of the Garry Owen House, says the place saved his life.

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pop-in visits just to make sure everything is in order. "If the place isn't standing tall, we say something, but nobody is breathing down their necks."

Kelly said between the board and the motorcycle club they keep an eye on things. "We've got our own lives, too, but what makes it work is everybody puts in their time." He said one key is that everyone at the shelter is allowed to be themselves, which helps them reintegrate back into society.

Beck noted that with PTSD, sleep patterns are interrupted, so someone may be up all night and then sleep all day. "There aren't a hell of a lot of places that you can do that, but you can here," he said.

Case management plays a huge role in getting these veterans on the right track and making connections for them. "It's crucial," Nicholas said, explaining that when he first came to Maine, he was told he didn't qualify for the service through Preble Street because he made too much money as a disabled veteran. Frank from Preble Street hooked him up with Beck and Philippi, who connected him with a case manager from Easter Seals.

"When they say they're going to do something, it gets done," Nicholas said. "It's a mission, and in a military way of thinking, the mission comes first."

Resident John Richardson of Rockland has been at the house for five months following a falling-out with family, while fellow Marine veteran Danny Sentell, of Connecticut, found the OH two months ago. "I had enough money to get alcohol and a hotel room, and got so drunk I tried to

kill myself." He was admitted to the hospital and through the Veterans' Crisis Center was put in contact with the OH/MC group. "I came into contact with these wonderful gentlemen who served our country ... a great support group," he said.

After losing friends and seeing so much death during his tour of duty in Afghanistan, Nicholas said, "This place ... it's everything I needed."

"It's vets helping vets," Ard said, adding that he has been credited with being the founder of the house and the motorcycle group, but insisted "You listen to the stories you're hearing today ... these guys are the founders. A true leader makes everybody who's with him look better, and that's what veterans do."

The MC does a lot of fundraising, but the annual cost of upkeep on the house is between \$25,000 and \$30,000. Beck said what's going to really hurt this winter are the drafty windows, which will force the furnace to work overtime, making the oil bill astronomical.

Kelly said the fundraising the MC does is twofold. "We have the rest of the veterans in the state that we help," he said, adding, "We pay mortgages, put in handicap showers ... whatever their need is to keep them safe."

The fundraisers also help get the word out about what the OH and MC is all about, and that travels through word of mouth — which is the primary way they locate veterans in need.

"Or they see a pamphlet somewhere, show up here down and out, and now they're out in the community doing good things," Nicholas said. He said most other places have a timeline that a person must adhere to. "Here, the timeline adheres to you."

"I was sleeping underneath a bridge

in San Diego, and I would not be sitting here right now without these guys," Nicholas said. He said what makes it even more special is the camaraderie after leaving. "If I need something, I pick up the phone and call them, and they are always there," he said. "These guys have told me 'we've got your back' and they've proved it in spades," he added. "It's a brotherhood, and I feel like I've found it."

Kelly said that's a common theme with most every veteran who has come through the house, now more than 30. He said they are free to leave the house anytime they want, but most stay until "their head is in a safe place." Philippi concurred, and said those who live in the house are self-monitored, and some can't live in a group situation.

"Not everybody's willing to help themselves," Nicholas said, "A lot of people are looking for a handout, not a hand up."

The goal is to complete the purchase of the present house, then expand to another foundation next door. "There's room to expand here to at least 16 to 20 beds," Philippi said.

Every cent of contributions made to Garry Owen House and Garry Owen Motorcycle Club stays in Maine and goes to veterans. Tax-deductible donations can be sent to Garry Owen House, P.O. Box 34, Liberty, ME 04949 or to Bangor Savings Bank, 7 Belmont Ave., Belfast, ME 04915. For more information on the groups, visit garryowenhouse.org.

Kelly said everything that has been said and done is great, but if the \$50,000 for the matured lease can't be realized, then it's all for naught. In the same breath, he said, "Maine's great ... I've got a feeling the people are going to step up."