

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Ballgame no toy factory in raising housing \$\$\$ for vets

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It's inspiring to honor veterans in the third inning at our big-league ballparks and during the National Anthem at the United Center.

But it's even more worthwhile when we divert some of our beer and hot-dog money to help these same men and women when we attend a sporting event.

"These folks have done a lot for us and our country," said Dan Klein. "We can't let them down...like they've been let down."

Klein spoke this stark truism at a ballgame where veterans were boosted with action and cash, not just pomp and circumstances. Heading up the "Veterans Build Project" in Lake County, Ind. for Habitat for Humanity, Klein saw how fans can put their money where their mouths are, as part of his organization's first baseball fund-raiser staged by Don Popravak's Northwest Indiana Oilmen.

On a classic summer evening at Whiting, Ind.'s bucolic Oil City Stadium, the surroundings giving off the veneer of an old-school "town ball" game, fans enjoyed the collegiate-league action while knowing they may have helped some veterans put a roof over their heads and that of their families. Sixty percent of all ticket



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Dan Klein (left) spearheads the Veterans Build Project, heartily endorsed by military wife and mother Akili Shakur.

sales from the game went to the project, while veterans and supporters alike raised more funds via T-shirt sales just inside the stadium gates.

This was not the toy factory at all for Oilmen co-owner Popravak, also a member of the Chicago Baseball Museum's board of directors. He might have staged his most impactful game of the season.

Here's what was at stake. In operation for 28 years, Habitat for Humanity needs to raise \$1 million annually to build about seven houses for veterans in Lake County, on land that often is obtained cheaply from the county when it is abandoned and goes off the tax rolls. The organization has constructed 76 homes overall in its existence. Each three-bedroom, one-bathroom ranch home costs \$95,000. Factoring in the land acquisition, the total cost is \$135,000 per piece of property.

Such a deal, if veterans can find out about the program directly from Habitat for Humanity or the Northwest Veterans Action Council, <http://www.nwiveterans.com/news/the-2014-veterans-build-project-2/>, a regional clearinghouse for a variety of veterans programs.

'Sweat equity' for homeowner

"They're energy efficient, with 2-by-6 walls," said Klein "When we're finished, we sell the house to the 'partner family.' They need to have income, and be willing to partner with us – by partner put in 300 hours of sweat equity in building the house. If they do not have (construction) skills, they will learn them."

Such a deal for perspiring. The mortgage, from Habitat from Humanity, is zero percent interest-free. Monthly payment comes out to about \$500, which includes taxes and insurance. You can't rent a room that cheaply in a big metropolitan area.

But Habitat doesn't just obtain free labor from the veterans. They help them become responsible homeowners and household budget managers.

"We require they go through a 10-week course in 'Finance 101,'" Klein said. "They learn how to use the bank instead of a payday loan service. It all begins with learning how to spend.



Oilmen co-owner Don Popravak (left) hosted the benefit night, attended by the likes of 90-year-old Marine vet Bill Wellman (center) and Michael Sparber (right) of the Northwest Indiana Veterans Council.



Habitat for Humanity volunteers at the benefit game included (from left) Gene Kessler, Mary Morstadt, Vernon Richards, Len Sherwink, Michael Sparber and Joseph Coates.

“We work with them to get their credit to where it needs to be. They learn that having decent credit rating affects homeowner’s insurance.”

Unemployment among returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans has been a huge problem for years. The jobless rate for vets is higher than the national average. Of course, mishandling of vets’ medical scheduling and treatment at VA hospitals is the scandal du jour this year, requiring the personal attention of President Obama.

Viet vets contribute to housing need

Yet housing ranks right up with jobs and medical treatment as a crying need right now. And it’s a crunch in timing, said Michael Sparber of the NWI Veterans Council. Returning Iraq and Afghanistan vets need domiciles just as the huge Vietnam-era generation moves into retirement and often require downsized residences or even a primary home, if they have been displaced in the Great Recession.

When recent vets come back Stateside, they often find out they can’t go home again, either to parents or even former housing.

The biggest housing crisis involved the millions of World War II veterans who came home in 1945-46. Very little new residential construction had taken place for the previous 15 years due to the war and Great Depression. Yet multiple generations bunking in the same home, at least for a little while, was more an accepted part of the culture then.

Bill Wellman, probably the youngest-looking 90-year-old in Northwest Indiana, was a game attendee and pre-game honoree. After his service as a Marine in the Pacific in World War II, Wellman said he simply went home. Wasn’t a big deal, he remembered.

Values have changed now, according to Akili Shakur, widow of Vietnam Marine vet Geometry Jones and mother of Army Sgt. Jasmine Butler, who has endured five deployments, including Iraq, Afghanistan and Korea.

“People don’t count you as homeless as long as you can go and sleep somewhere,” said Portage, Ind.’s Shakur, who helped in the Oil City Stadium fund-raising. “You are homeless if you don’t live as head of your household. You’ve got females returning and they have children. You don’t hear much about female veterans. When you come in you have to re-adjust your household.”

Sergeant takes in homeless vets

Her daughter never stops being a leader to her men and women after they’re mustered out, and short on good fortune.

“Sgt. Butler has taken individuals who have come out of the military without a place to stay, to stay at her house until they can get on their feet to get themselves together,” Shakur said. “They’re one big family. I’ve seen her come back from Iraq, and before she went to see her own children she stopped in to see one of her soldiers who had just had a baby, just home from the hospital.”

Making matters worse is veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or other after-effects. Some employers are nervous in hiring vets for just that reason. When they have an unstable living situation, it only complicates the quest for employment even more.

“They have a lot of issues going in,” Shakur said. “It’s easy to find yourself homeless. You start to self-medicate. People don’t understand what you’re dealing with.

“(Some veterans) sleep with their weapons. Everywhere they go, they have a weapon. They only feel comfortable with a weapon. You’ve got all that going.”

Given the longevity of the Veterans Build Project, linking qualified applicants up with the program seems to be the biggest challenge. The homes are being built, the financial teams can’t be beat.

“It’s word of mouth. It should be more than that,” said Iraq conflict Marine vet Jose Terrazas of Lansing, Ill. Get one Marine involved in the sweat-equity, and he’ll try to get his buddies to help out.

The Oil City game enabled Habitat for Humanity to achieve 1/3 of its annual fund-raising goal. Klein said corporate sponsors like Hyundai USA helped bankroll an April breakfast that got the cash flowing.



Lisa Benko shows off a Habitat for Humanity shirt for sale to benefit the Veterans Build Project.

But to paraphrase Hawk Harrelson, don't stop now, boys. This is prime construction season. You don't need to go to a game to help the service people who defended you. They can help themselves put roofs over their heads to call their own with a little help from you. Just click on the link above. Time to repay some debts originally accrued through blood and sacrifice.