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Navy Veteran Devotes Life to Aiding Homeless Female Vets

By Elaine Sanchez
American Forces Press Service

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C., July 25, 2011 -- When Barbara Marshall first set eyes on her new 5,000-square foot home here that would enable her to take in more homeless female veterans than ever before, a sense of relief washed over her and the word "astounding" came to mind. The home was living proof that help finally had arrived.



First Lady Michelle Obama greets Navy veteran Barbara Marshall on the set of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" in Fayetteville, N.C., July 21, 2011. Obama appeared on the ABC reality show to thank Marshall for her work to support homeless female veterans. DOD photo by Elaine Sanchez. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; high-resolution image available.)

That help came in the form of more than 3,000 volunteers and the ABC reality show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." Thanks to both, the Navy veteran's modest 1,500-square-foot home -- which serves as a shelter and information center for homeless female veterans -- received a massive overhaul last week.

Marshall received the keys to the new and improved "Steps-N-Stages Jubilee House" July 22. First Lady Michelle Obama was there to help unveil the two-story, cabin-style home, which features a large resource center, dining hall, common areas and a greenhouse.

"When I saw Mrs. Obama and the new home, all I could think of was 'Yay,'" she said. "I know that's not that profound, but I said it in my heart and my mind and my spirit, and then I said, 'Astounding. Help is here -- tremendous help.'"

This help comes in the wake of years of selfless assistance to countless others. Marshall established the Jubilee House with her own funds in August to offer shelter and to pass on information and resources to homeless female veterans -- the same information she felt she could have used when she fell on some tough times of her own.

Marshall left the Navy in 2001, and, four years later entered a time of crisis, she said, with financial, health and personal issues taking their toll.

"I was facing many of the issues that women who come to my door face," she said. Marshall reached out to the community for help and sought resources aimed at helping female veterans, but came up short.

"Some parts of it were just a bit uncertain," she said. "I saw a need to have a place where women veterans could actually get access to the types of resources and information they need."

Marshall eventually found her way through her own crises, and, with her own struggles in mind, turned her attention to helping others.

"It came from my own desire to see women make a successful transition," she said. "A homeless woman has children -- brings with her homeless children. I think that our nation is not prepared for that kind of legacy. We need to leave a good, positive legacy for our women vets and for their children."

Marshall began to visit libraries and other areas frequented by homeless women and offered her help with everything from VA claims and transportation to food and shelter.

"The top of my vehicle became my office," she said.

Marshall took women into her own home, offering them food and shelter while caring for her own two children. She eventually saved enough money to purchase a foreclosure on Langdon Street here last summer.

"We do an assessment and see what they're most in need of," she said of the veterans, "what services we can assist with directly and indirectly. At all costs we stay in touch with that women veteran until her life and her children's lives are stabilized."

The Jubilee House has assisted female veterans from all eras and conflicts, with a recent, and disturbing, onslaught of veterans from recent wars, she noted.

"A lot of these women veterans are coming back with post-traumatic stress, with family changes and situations that are uncertain, and many are ending up homeless," she said.

The small, 1,500-square-foot home housed up to five veterans and their families, but Marshall struggled to meet the demand as word spread of her services. The Veterans Affairs Department basically had her on their speed dial, she said, and frequently referred women to her.

As the Jubilee House's popularity grew, Marshall found herself in a tough spot -- having to turn homeless veterans away.

Meanwhile, word of her dedication to veterans had spread. Producers from "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" heard of Marshall's work and came knocking on her door two weeks ago with some good news. She would be the recipient of a new and improved Jubilee House.

Marshall accepted the new home July 21 with several of the home's residents at her side, including Judy Hilburn.

Hilburn was left homeless several years ago after her husband's death and an illness that left her without a job and with massive medical and personal bills to pay. For two years, Hilburn, a six-year Army veteran, lived in her truck.

"Just when you think everything is going so great, you get sideswiped," she said.

With no end to her troubles in sight, Hilburn resigned herself to a difficult fate -- that is, she said, until she found her miracle: the Jubilee House.

Hilburn met Marshall at a center that provides meals to the homeless, and she moved into the Jubilee House the next morning. "It's been a miracle for me," she said. "Barbara helped me get my VA disability approved; my first check is in my purse."

"If I'd known I was eligible for VA benefits then, I wouldn't have gone broke paying doctor bills," she added. "That's what this place is all about: knowledge."

The first lady expressed her admiration for Marshall and the work she's doing to aid veterans during her visit here last week. "She is a strong, courageous woman," Obama said of Marshall.

"It's a powerful story of how veterans are continuing to serve this country even when they are no longer in uniform," she added. "The fact that this woman has opened her home -- which she didn't have much -- to other women who are struggling, is just a powerful statement of the courage and the strength that our veterans show."

Marshall's new Hollywood connection hasn't altered the course of her local mission in aiding female veterans. But the new home will allow for a few major improvements. "I will not have to turn women veterans away, ever, as I've done this past week, this past month, and even at the beginning of this year," she said.

Marshall said she won't rest until female veteran homelessness is eradicated.

"My daughter is active-duty Army," she said. "What's happening to these women could happen to my daughter. We need to join forces as a community -- as agencies, the various five [service] branches, veteran service organizations, faith groups -- we need to join hands and make a difference in the lives of homeless veterans."

"I see this organization, this agency, being part of this fight all the way to the end," she added.

The episode of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" featuring Marshall is scheduled to air in October.

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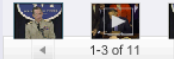


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