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20 Years in the Cabinet

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Fisher Houses

Commemorating Lincoln

Fisher Houses provide a 'home away from home' for families of severely injured or wounded veterans.

Chris Ott felt like she had been “to hell and back” since the day in March 2007 when her son, John “J.T.” Doody, was shot in the right leg in Iraq. He was making progress at first, but then he suffered a debilitating stroke caused by a blood infection, which ultimately led to the Marine’s paralysis and loss of eyesight and speech.

While her son underwent surgery, treatment and rehabilitation at the Naval Medical Center San Diego and then at the polytrauma center at the James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital in Tampa, Fla., she wanted to be close by.

“After the injury, you’re in such shock,” Ott recalled. “You walk around in a daze, just trying to get through the day. But the Fisher House is there. It allows us to be close to our loved ones and gives us the opportunity to talk to one another—people who



“It’s an honor to be in this job,” says Wayne Walker, manager of the Fisher House at the VA medical center in Richmond, Va.

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‘A family’s love is good medicine’

are going through the same thing. We each have our meltdowns. But you hold each other up and create a new sense of family there.”

Fisher Houses are large, modern homes—the newer ones have 20 bedroom suites with private baths—that are built and donated by the Fisher House Foundation to the Department of Defense or VA to support families of service members or veterans with

severe wounds or injuries who are in need of lodging while their loved ones receive medical care.

“I don’t know what I would have done if the Fisher House wasn’t there for me,” said Ott. “Well actually, I do know. I would have found a way to be close to my son. I would have slept in a chair by his bed.”

The Fisher Houses are usually located within walking distance of the

VA or military medical center. They have elevators and common areas, including kitchens, laundry facilities, dining rooms, living rooms, family rooms and libraries.

Ott stayed at two Fisher Houses: the Naval Medical Center San Diego Fisher House, from March to May 2007, and the Tampa VA Fisher House, from February to December 2008.

She credits the Fisher House as a major contributor to her son's ongoing recovery. Recently, J.T. started talking—and he hasn't stopped since. "J.T. made so much progress when he stayed there. And I'm convinced that having their families so close is the number one factor in these young guys getting better. It gives them the feeling of being at home. The Fisher House is what allows that to happen."

Ott's son is now an outpatient and lives in Riverview, Fla. She moved him into his own house as a Christmas present.

Fisher Houses came to be built at VA medical facilities because a nurse at the Samuel S. Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany, N.Y., in the early 1990s sensed an opportunity and acted on it.

Jo-Anne Saulsbery saw a televised story in which New York construction magnate Zachary Fisher talked about how his foundation provided homes for the families of severely wounded service members next to military hospitals where their loved ones were being cared for—she thought it was something that could be done at VA medical centers as well.

"I thought, 'Why not jot a letter to [Zachary Fisher] and ask him how I could get started setting up a comfort home here,'" Saulsbery told the Fisher House magazine in 1994.

She had struck the right chord. Two weeks later, she got a call from one of Fisher's associates, who told her the foundation wanted to build a Fisher House at the Albany VA Medical Center.

In 1994, the Fisher House at Albany became the first to house veterans' families at a VA medical facility.

"She really helped get this house built and get things started at VA," said Jerry Jensen, manager of the Albany Fisher House. "She saw the need. She wanted to help, and she found a way to do it."

There are now 13 Fisher Houses at VA medical facilities, and more are on the way. Seven are in pre-

construction phases, and plans call for as many as 11 others to be built at VA facilities over the next few years. The VA Secretary provides the Fisher House Foundation a list of the department's highest priorities. Fisher Houses have been built near all Level One Polytrauma Rehabilitation Centers.

The program began in 1990 with a vision by Zachary Fisher and wife Elizabeth to serve family members in recognition of the special sacrifices of the men and women in uniform and the hardships of military service. Asked once why the Fishers build these homes, Zachary responded, "Elizabeth and I believe it's important to show in tangible ways our feelings of appreciation for our country and the courageous, professional and dedicated men and women who protect and defend it, enabling the rest of us to enjoy the freedoms that we too often take for granted."

From 1990 to 1998, all Fisher Houses were given as gifts to the federal government by the Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher Armed Services Foundation. Zachary Fisher died in 1999 and the Fisher House Founda-

tion assumed the mission of building new Fisher Houses.

Today, there are 43 Fisher Houses located at military hospitals in the U.S. and overseas, and at VA medical centers throughout the country. Nearly 10,000 families stay in Fisher Houses each year, and more than 120,000 families have been Fisher House guests since the program began. The Fisher House program has made available nearly 3 million days of lodging to family members since the program originated in 1990.

Fisher Houses are constructed by the Fisher House Foundation on government land (military bases or VA medical center grounds). When they are completed, VA Fisher Houses are donated to VA.

Carol Sheets, Family Hospitality Program manager at VA headquarters, said families of patients are approved to stay following an initial screening typically conducted by a social worker for the patient. The social worker then makes the referral to the Fisher House manager. The manager lets the referring social worker know if there is a room available and contacts the veteran or family to arrange for the



Audrey Fisher, Fisher House Foundation ambassador, hands the key to the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System Fisher House to director Donna Beiter; house manager Sharon Hudson is at right.

Fisher House stay.

Patients accompanied by their family members may also stay in a Fisher House if they are self-sufficient and receiving extended outpatient medical care, such as an organ transplant, chemotherapy or radiation therapy. Caregivers for veterans also are authorized to stay at the houses.

John Stenger, director of Health Care Engineering at VA Central Office, said Fisher Houses have recently opened in Los Angeles and Dallas, with new houses underway in Boston, St. Louis, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, Augusta, Ga., and

Miami. The engineering and safety programs in headquarters are working closely with each of these VA medical centers to coordinate the projects, Stenger said.

Fisher Houses offer home-like environments where families can prepare meals, do their laundry, relax and visit with other families. Each Fisher House is beautifully decorated and professionally furnished to fit the style of the region. There is no charge to stay in a Fisher House, although donations to the Fisher House General Post Fund are accepted.

Having families nearby also helps the patients in their recovery.

“A family’s love is good medicine,” said Ken Fisher, echoing the major theme of the Fisher House Foundation. He joined the foundation board after his uncle Zachary died.

“This is a very stressful time for a veteran and the veteran’s family,” said Dr. Madhu Agarwal, VA’s chief officer for Patient Care Services, which oversees VA’s Fisher House program. “By taking care of a veteran’s family,

we are providing services that help our patients.”

Fisher said the houses are a good example of how the public and private sectors can come together for the overall benefit of the American people.

He said the number of Fisher Houses at VA medical centers is expanding to meet the need for additional housing for family members in large part because of the increased number of veterans and service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with severe wounds.

“New houses were not built just because we are able to build them,” Fisher said. “We had them built where the needs are the greatest.”

Fisher added that the houses also serve as a setting in which families provide moral and psychological support for each other.

“It’s an important byproduct—the bonding of family support for each other is found in the common areas where they meet and share their experiences.”

VA Fisher Houses

The Fisher House Foundation has constructed and donated 13 houses to VA:

- VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System, Denver
- Samuel S. Stratton VA Medical Center, Albany, N.Y.
- Minneapolis VA Medical Center
- West Palm Beach (Fla.) VA Medical Center
- Cincinnati VA Medical Center
- Bay Pines (Fla.) VA Health Care System
- Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, Houston
- VA Palo Alto (Calif.) Health Care System
- James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital, Tampa, Fla.
- Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center, Richmond, Va.
- VA Puget Sound Health Care System, Seattle
- VA North Texas Health Care System, Dallas
- VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

* With the exception of the Denver VA Fisher House, which is located on the grounds of the former Fitzsimmons Army Hospital, all VA Fisher Houses are on the grounds of the VA medical center.

More Houses Planned for the Future

Currently, seven Fisher Houses are proffered and in pre-construction phases at:

- Washington (D.C.) VA Medical Center
- Miami VA Health Care System
- Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center, Augusta, Ga.
- Hines (Ill.) VA Hospital
- VA Boston Healthcare System
- Minneapolis VA Medical Center (second house)
- St. Louis VA Medical Center

And the next recommended sites for future Fisher Houses are:

- Birmingham (Ala.) VA Medical Center
- VA Long Beach (Calif.) Healthcare System
- VA Connecticut Healthcare System, West Haven
- Lexington (Ky.) VA Medical Center
- VA New York Harbor Healthcare System, Brooklyn
- Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center
- VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System
- VA Tennessee Valley Healthcare System, Murfreesboro
- South Texas Veterans Health Care System, San Antonio
- VA Salt Lake City Health Care System
- Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center, Milwaukee

At the VA Puget Sound Health Care System just outside Seattle, Fisher House residents and staff got used to seeing 4-year-old Jessica Storrs playing with her toys around the house. Her sunny, playful disposition belied the difficult time the girl's mother and aunt were having while the girl's father was undergoing treatment and care at VA Puget Sound.

Jessica's father, Niles, was admitted to VA in November 2008 and underwent a series of operations for cardiac-related complications. He was discharged after a weeklong stay and is back home with his family in Aberdeen, Wash.

"Having the little girl so close by was a big part of what helped the veteran bounce back," said Cecile Bagrow, Fisher House manager at



Marilyn White, left, and Dorothy Damiano are longtime volunteers at VA's first Fisher House, on the grounds of the VA medical center in Albany, N.Y., where a photo of Fisher House founders Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher hangs above the mantel.

Comfort and Companionship

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VA Puget Sound. "Seeing and feeling the girl every day most certainly helped the girl's father recover. It's a great example of how having families nearby at the Fisher Houses provides veterans with inspiration to help them get through their sometimes challenging ordeals."

The Fisher Houses help families defray costly housing, food and transportation expenses while providing ways for them to be close to their loved ones.

For more than 15 years, Jim and Ann Rogers made the six-hour drive from their home in Parsons, W.Va., to the Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond, Va., several times a year to transport and be with their son, Ron, whenever he needed treatment related to the spinal cord injuries he suffered in a 1993 automobile accident while serving at Little Rock Air Force Base in Arkansas.

Many of their visits required

hotel stays five or six miles from the medical center for days or weeks at a time. Because they wanted to stay with their son around the clock, the two would travel back and forth from the hotel to the hospital, sometimes at odd hours late at night or early in the morning. Going back and forth was both trying and taxing on them physically, mentally and emotionally. And it was expensive, because they were paying for their own lodging, meals and transportation.

Now, thanks to the recently completed Fisher House right on the grounds of the Richmond medical center, the two are only a few minutes away.

Jim Rogers estimates he and his wife have made about 30 trips to be with Ron during his hospital stays over the years. When the Fisher House in Richmond was completed last September, the Rogerses stayed for about four months. They went home and came back for another

three weeks in January.

"It was magical for us to be able to stay there and be close to Ron during the holidays," said Ann Rogers.

VA provides staff to run its Fisher Houses. Sheets said Fisher House managers and support staff are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the house.

"They keep the Fisher House in tip-top shape, collaborating with many other VA staff and volunteers, Central Office, the Fisher House Foundation and community supporters," Sheets said.

Fisher House managers deal with families in stressful situations; their job is to make sure those families are comfortably accommodated.

"I see my role, and that of the Fisher House staff, as an advocate for the families, keeping their best interests at heart," said Bagrow, the Fisher House manager at Puget Sound. "We offer the gift of hospitality—listening to stories, giving hugs, bringing some

humor to their day.”

“It’s an honor to be in this job,” said Wayne Walker, who became Fisher House manager in Richmond after his Army career, including serving as a battalion command sergeant major in Afghanistan. Walker said his military background helps him in many ways because he was separated from his family at different intervals during his Army career, so he knows and understands what families go through.

“The family members who stay here are here because of the sacrifices made by their loved ones in service to their country,” Walker said. “We do everything we can to make them feel at home while they are here.”

Fisher House managers also share their individual experiences and network through national conference calls, annual conferences and reaching out to each other.

“They have a unique friendship and support each other in service to our nation’s veterans, service members and their families,” Sheets said.

In addition to making sure the

needs of the families are met, Fisher House managers develop policies and standard operating procedures for successful operation of the Fisher House.

Managers serve as liaisons between the clinical providers and veterans and families lodged at Fisher House. They consult with clinical staff to enhance services provided and typically make appropriate referrals for psychosocial support.

“Many of our volunteers are there because they can personally relate to what the families are going through.”

They partner with other medical center staff to ensure smooth operation of the house. They engage community groups and veterans service organizations to plan special activities and events both at the Fisher House and in the community.

And Fisher House managers work closely with the hundreds of volunteers who serve at houses throughout VA.

Volunteers serve in a variety of

ways, ranging from organizing events to cooking to acting as a liaison between Fisher House managers and the VA medical center staff.

Their most important role, however, may be the comfort and companionship they provide to families.

Georgianna Smith has been volunteering at the Tampa Fisher House since July 2007, as a form of therapy after her son, Army Capt. Kevin

Joseph Smith, was killed on Dec. 8, 2005, by a roadside bomb while serving in Iraq.

Smith does a range of chores around the Fisher House. She prides herself on working to make the house look like a 5-Star Hotel. More important, she can understand what the families are going through, dealing with the severe wounds of their loved ones as they are being cared for at the medical center’s Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center.

“I know the kind of pain—and change—these families are going through,” Smith said. “I am there for these families to help them with the change they have to learn to deal with. There’s nothing more important.”

She now has her own cleaning business, and donates her time and services to the Fisher House. She also has led a drive to get local businesses to donate cleaning supplies and carpet cleaning equipment.

Volunteers like Smith play a major role not only in providing meals and treats, but also in helping families cope with their situations.

In Albany, Dorothy Damiano and Marilyn White have been baking for Fisher House guests for many years.

Damiano retired in 1983 from the Albany VA Medical Center, where she worked as a trauma nurse. She has volunteered at the Fisher House since



Four-year-old Jessica Storrs was a familiar sight around the VA Puget Sound Health Care System Fisher House when her father was undergoing treatment at the health care system.



Blue Star Mother Mallie Murray bakes for the families staying at the Fisher House at the VA medical center in Richmond, Va., on Wednesdays.

1994, when it first opened. Damiano is well known to the families who stay at the Albany location even today. Her specialties are whoopee pies, chocolate chip cookies, brownies and chocolate cake.

On Mondays and Thursdays, guests will find White there, baking brownies, apple cakes, scones and raspberry squares. She also orients new guests and assists with managing the house.

Damiano and White often sit down with the guests having coffee or tea and sharing stories. Sometimes they lend a shoulder to cry on.

"Dorothy Damiano was one of the first VA volunteers at a Fisher House," said Laura Balun, director of VA's Voluntary Service in headquarters. "The comfort and love and relationships that take place at the Fisher Houses come about because of the

dedication of volunteers like Dorothy. Many of our volunteers are there because they can personally relate to what the families are going through."

On Wednesdays, Blue Star Mothers Mallie Murray, Rebecca Hickman and Linda Carr usually can be found baking brownies, cupcakes and snacks for Fisher House families at the Richmond VA Medical Center. They prepared the Thanksgiving meal for guests last year. They are planning to begin serving the guests a monthly meal.

Sometimes volunteers run errands and help with transportation and other tasks, particularly helpful because many of the guests are not familiar with the city in which they are staying.

The group also recently spurred a fund-raising campaign that led to the purchase of a golf cart used to help

transport the guests from the Fisher House to the hospital to visit their loved ones.

Murray's son serves in the Marine Corps and has been to Iraq three times.

"You're dealing with people's emotions, with their finances, with the personal tragedy of whatever happened to their loved ones," Murray said. "You have to provide empathy and sympathy and still not lose your perspective."

"All of us say, 'There but for the grace of God go I,'" said Hickman.

"We are here to help and offer them some hope," added Carr. "We let them know that somebody does care." **VA**

By Bill Outlaw

Editor's note: Susan Wentzell contributed to this story.