

MILITARY TIMES SALUTES FISHER HOUSE

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25 YEARS OF SERVICE

FIVE QUESTIONS >> FOR THE MAN BEHIND THE FISHER HOUSES

'Thank you' is not enough

By Karen Jowers
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In 1989, the late Zachary Fisher learned from Pauline Trost, the wife of then-Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Carlisle Trost, that families didn't have an affordable place to stay when they traveled to a military hospital to be at the bedside of their loved ones — adding more stress and financial burden at an already difficult time.

"Zach said, 'I can handle this. I can fill this gap. I have construction skills. I have my own architect,'" said Kenneth Fisher, Zachary's grandnephew, and the chairman and CEO of the Fisher House Foundation.

In 1990, Zachary Fisher and his wife, Elizabeth, launched a program that resulted in the first Fisher House, at what was then the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

This year, families stay at 65 Fisher Houses nationwide, generally within walking distance of military and Veterans Affairs department hospitals. Another seven houses are in the works. The foundation has expanded to include three scholarship programs for military families; the Hero Miles program, converting donated frequent-flier miles into airline tickets for wounded, ill and injured troops and their families to be together; and Hotels for Heroes, converting donated hotel reward points to offer hotel rooms when no Fisher House rooms are available.

Kenneth Fisher talked about the 25 years of the Fisher House Foundation, and how the mission has evolved.



DANIEL WOOLFOLK/STAFF

Kenneth Fisher, chairman and CEO of the Fisher House Foundation, says he wants the foundation to be transparent. "I want them to know I'm spending 96 cents on the dollar on my program and four cents on administrative."

1 **Q. As wounded troops began returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, what sort of discussions did you have behind the scenes in the Fisher family, given the fact that you had already been building Fisher Houses for more 10 years?**

A. We knew we were going to have to ramp up. When they started coming back from Afghanistan, we knew the mission was going to change, but in a way we had no idea. I looked at our budget, I didn't know how we were going to pay for it. I had a few sleepless nights. ... And all of a sudden came this incredible groundswell of support from the American people who found out what we were doing.

2 **Q. Did you ever think these houses would be needed to the degree they are needed now?**

A. No. I actually thought we were just a mom-and-pop deal. I thought we were going to build one or two houses a year and it wouldn't be very taxing on my time. I kind of just looked at it as something that was my contribution to the military. Did I know that the things that happened to me over the last few years would have happened, and that I'd be standing here 25 years after its founding and built almost 41 houses in my tenure? No, I had no idea. I see the results with the families that I've had the good fortune to know. These people change your life.

3 **Q. How does your family's business experience inform the operation of the Fisher House Foundation and contribute to its success?**

A. We've been developers our whole lives. Started out as bricklayers. We had the skill sets to build these houses in a way the government couldn't. We work outside the bureaucracy, for the most part. We build a house we would want to live in. We use the best materials we can afford. We formed a public-private partnership with the government, so that we would build them, then gift them to whichever branch they would serve. (The services) would operate, staff and maintain them in perpetuity.

4 **Q. Where do you see this program 25 years from now?**

A. That book is not finished yet. Whatever happens over the next 25 years, that's going to be my kids' issue. I see my kids one day running this. That would give me a lot of joy, to pass on what was given to me. We view what we do as very much generational, not just from the business side, but the philanthropic side. The next 25 years, I'd like to be around to see it, I may be doing something else, but that would give me the best sense of accomplishment if the foundation were passed on to my children.

5 **Q. When you received the Marshall Award from the Association of the U.S. Army, you titled your remarks, " 'Thank you for your service' is no longer enough." What did you mean?**

A. We owe these men and women so much. We owe them a system that can take care of them ... not just initially, but on follow-up. That's a good start to say, "Thank you for your service." One percent raises their hand and takes an oath. They're defending you. You're not doing them a favor. They're doing you a big one. You don't just turn your back on them when they come back hurt, you don't turn your back on their families. That's what 'thank you for your service is not enough' was about.

