

Home of the Brave

Apartment operators donate money and materials to help veterans struggling with PTSD.

BY LAUREN BOSTON



Red, purple and green starbursts exploded in the sky, children waving miniature American flags under the canopy of embers.

But while the majority of Americans were celebrating the Fourth of July with hot dogs, fireworks and The Star-Spangled Banner this summer, Samuel Askins saw bombs bursting in air.

The U.S. Army Infantryman spent 545 days in Iraq. During his deployment, he suffered a concussion in an explosion that eventually triggered Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"The fireworks kill me every year," Askins, 35, told ABC News in July. "This summer I went fishing and I put the boat in the water when a cherry bomb exploded. I fell out of the boat. I will have to deal with this for the rest of my life."

Askins is not alone. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, as many as 30 percent of veterans suffer from PTSD. In 2012 alone, 349 service members committed suicide, exceeding the total combat fatalities in Afghanistan in 2012, and up 15 percent from 2011.

Invisible Wounds

With a PTSD epidemic sweeping the nation, many veterans struggle to reintegrate in society.

One organization dedicated to serving the needs of veterans such as Askins is Camp Hope, a mentorship program sponsored by the PTSD Foundation of America. The Houston facility provides veterans and their families with a 30-day PTSD recovery

program that includes pastoral counseling, peer mentoring and offsite small-group activities, in addition to interim housing.

Doug Brown, Managing Director of Capital Project Services for Greystar, became involved with the foundation through a Texas A&M Corps friend whose son served in Afghanistan.

"My friend contacted me and said, 'There's this wonder-

ful group that helps veterans

re-enter society, but none of them can continue to heal without a job,'" Brown says.

"Many veterans don't qualify for apartments because they don't have any credit or income. I have an unbelievable group of contacts and vendors, so I started the jobs initiative for the PTSD Foundation."

Brown began by reaching out to Stacy Hunt, Executive Director at Greystar, whose son committed suicide in 2011 after battling PTSD. Together, Brown and Hunt called their network of apartment industry colleagues and vendors.

The response from the Houston Apartment Association (HAA) community was immediate.

Brown says everything at Camp Hope—from the appliances



Samuel Askins and his daughter, Samantha Belle.





Mark Hiebert, HiebertPhotography.com



to the drywall to the buildings themselves—has been donated by HAA members looking to create a safe environment for returning veterans and their families. Member companies have also donated their services and workers, in addition to money and materials.

In 2013, HAA hosted its second annual Fun Run. More than 736 adults and children participated, raising over \$43,000 for Camp Hope. More than 300 employees from Camden Property Trust also spent a day recently working at Camp Hope as part of its national Camden Cares Month. Camden's vendors donated nearly \$50,000 to assist in building—and furnishing—two new homes for Camp Hope residents, installing a state-of-the-art playground, building a fence and landscaping the grounds.

"It was a day that has changed both Camden and Camp Hope forever," says Amy Funk, Regional Vice President, Camden Property Trust. "Words do not do it justice."

On the employment front, Greystar hired three Camp Hope veterans. Funk says Camden Property Trust is also exploring potential employment opportunities for Camp Hope veterans.

"The VA gives these veterans medication, but they don't have the resources to provide the support that they really need," Brown says. "These guys have immediate issues that need to be addressed, and we want to build a place to bring them and PTSD closer to us—whether it be mobile homes, FEMA trailers, whatever."



Healing With Hope

Brown views Camp Hope as a place for veterans to talk, heal and, in some cases, live. He hopes to leverage connections across the country to build Camp Hope facilities in other cities.

"Nothing like this has been done anywhere else in the country," says Brown, whose company has hired veterans from the program who have "experienced great successes in their recovery" and become valued employees. "We're working to get foundations started in San Diego and Atlanta and build a coalition of national companies so that places like this become easy to recreate wherever there's a need."

Askins, for one, is eternally grateful for the support. After attempting to commit suicide in 2008 by overdosing on prescription medication, Askins completed a six-month PTSD program in Colorado before becoming the first resident at Camp Hope. Today, he's the Director of National Outreach for the PTSD Foundation of America.

His PTSD will always be a challenge—particularly around the holidays—but Camp Hope has given Askins a support system.

This past Fourth of July, Askins and other Camp Hope veterans went to a Houston Astros baseball game, facing the holiday with strength in numbers. They sat together in the same section and sang The Star-Spangled Banner. 🇺🇸

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Camp Hope is in need of gift cards, cleaning supplies, toiletries, bedding, etc. For a full donation list, visit <http://ptsdusa.org/support-u/>.