

VHS Breaks Ground On Homes for Veterans



George Horsford | Daily Sun

U.S. Marine Corps veteran Stephanie Fernandez and her daughters, Abigail Williams, 1, and Isabella Widmann, 13, at center, participate in the Building Homes for Heroes groundbreaking ceremony for their home with seniors from The Villages High School Construction Management Academy Nolan Barton, from left, Taylor Byers, Joshua Griffing and Jaiden Harrison on Tuesday in Lake Panasoffkee.

Construction Management Academy students scooped their first shovel of dirt side-by-side with future homeowners.

By **GARRETT SHIFLET**
Daily Sun Staff Writer

More than a dozen shovels dug into two cleared lots on Tuesday in Lake Panasoffkee. What started as dirt will be, by the end of the school year, safe and secure home sites for two veterans and their families.

The Villages High School and Building Homes For Heroes are continuing their third year of

partnership with the construction of homes for U.S. Marine Corps veteran Stephanie Fernandez and Army veteran Tristan Baker, who were present with their loved ones.

Standing at the site of their future home, Fernandez and her two daughters, Abigail and Isabella, couldn't help but cry.

"It feels so unreal," Fernandez said. "I'm just relieved as a mother that I could finally provide that stable housing for my kids."

Fernandez worked on V-22

Ospreys during her six years of service. She had to leave the military after suffering a back injury that left her with fibromyalgia and other complications. Once out of service, Fernandez continued to struggle with frequent moves. But she said it was her faith that saved her.

"I ended up moving in with my mom to Florida. We lost my stepdad along the way and she ended up losing her home also, so it's been a

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real struggle to keep up with everything," Fernandez said. "So, this is not only going to be a blessing for me and my family, but also a blessing for my mother. I know that God allowed this to happen and opened your hearts so that I can fulfill the purpose that He has for me here."

The second home will go to Baker, who attended the groundbreaking with his wife, Melissa, and three sons, Landan, Ethan and Rylan. An infantryman for 10 years, Baker was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. He left service with the rank of staff sergeant, but he too struggled transitioning from soldier to civilian. "It's still in a transition," Baker said. "When you serve and you deploy, nothing is ever the same."

It was by chance that Baker and his family came across Building Homes for Heroes.

"We were going through a housing crisis through the time," Baker said. "We were homeless and we were staying in a hotel. My wife was watching the TV and it came across the screen. We did our research and contacted them."

Building Homes for Heroes, founded in 2006, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that supports veterans and is best known for its house-building program, which partners with builders to create homes for veterans and their families. This is the fifth and sixth home built through its partnership with The Villages High School Construction Management Academy.



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STEPHANIE FERNANDEZ

U.S. Marine Corps veteran

A total of 24 academy seniors, split into morning and afternoon class shifts, will build the homes this year. Building these homes serve as the students' capstone project for the two-year academy, during which students get industry certifications in their junior year and then apply their learned skills in their senior year.

The morning shift of 11 seniors at the ceremony were eager to break ground.

"It's great experience," said student Joshua Griffing. "It's good knowing that it's going to support a good cause and it's just helping people who ultimately protect us and make a living here in this great country possible."

Construction Management Academy students take part in practically every aspect of the building process, from putting up walls and roof trusses to hanging siding and painting. They interact with and learn

from contractors who do the work that must be done by a licensed professional.

The crowd at the site included the dozens of supporters who provide money, experience professionals or materials for the project, such as RoMac Building Supply, Mike Scott Plumbing, Clymer Farner Barley and T&D Concrete.

"It's great hands-on experience where you build actual houses and learn from people in the trades," Griffing said.

The homes will be based on the Pebble Beach model used by The Villages Residential Construction and Home Warranty, which is the acting superintendent on the sites. The model is 2,138 square feet and has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a two-car garage. Students will begin work on the homes in earnest once the slabs are poured at the sites.

Each family walked around the sites and met with students and sponsors of the build.

After the ceremony, Baker walked with his family down to the lakeshore where he hopes to fish one day with his kids.

"It's a blessing," he said. "I don't know how to explain it. I live by the motto one of my first sergeants told me, 'Hard times don't last, but hard men do. So always take one step forward every day.'"

The academy will build a total of four houses this year. This includes the two homes for Building Homes For Heroes and two homes for Habitat for Humanity Lake-Sumter.

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Photos by George Horstford | Daily Sun

Army veteran Tristan Baker, left, is joined by his wife, Melissa, and their three children as they thank those attending the groundbreaking ceremony for their home built by the Building Homes for Heroes program Tuesday in Lake Panasoffkee.



Byers, a senior with The Villages High School Construction Management Academy, introduces himself during the groundbreaking ceremony Tuesday.