



HEALING IN THE HILLS

**Green City lodge offers
recreation for veterans**

Kansas City builder Orin Jackson, center, completed work earlier this year on Hickory Hills Veterans Lodge with some help from volunteers like Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Javier Sandoval, left, and retired Army Staff Sgt. Shane Zavodny. The nonprofit offers counseling and treatment for veterans and active duty members of the military and law enforcement alongside outdoor recreation.

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For Kansas City-based roofer and remodeler Orin Jackson, the past 18 months have seen a lot of hard work done and progress made on his property near Green City. Some folks have their hobby farms and others want to build a new house out in the country, but Orin had a different dream in mind when he started building. Inside the 1,200 square feet that is Hickory Hills Veterans Lodge, there's a big purpose at work.

"There's become almost a cottage industry out there of programs with activities concerning veterans," Orin says, "but none with a tangible place to receive treatment for PTSD or deal with traumatic brain injuries or physical injuries, which many of our nation's veterans are suffering from. And none with a place built exclusively for this purpose — all while relaxing and enjoying life."

Since 1999, Orin has made friends with Marines and Army Reserve soldiers working at the former Richards-Gebaur Air Force Base outside of Kansas City. Servicemen and women were invited over to his home for Thanksgiving dinners, and many weekend getaways on the timbered, rolling hills in northeastern Sullivan County.

Orin maintained those relationships through the years. When troops were deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq, Orin would keep in touch with them via Skype. As they returned home, he began learning about post-traumatic stress disorder, which was affecting his friends, their fellow veterans and those working in law enforcement.

"Until about two years ago, I didn't really know what PTSD meant," the North Central Missouri Electric Cooperative member says. "When I did learn what it was and how people can get through it, I think that shed some light for me that I had the resources to help."

According to the National Center for PTSD, spending time in the outdoors is one way to help veterans cope with traumatic stress reactions. Since he was already bringing veterans out to the property, Orin decided to make it official and incorporate Hickory Hills as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The lodge also offers treatment in the form of group counseling and addiction specialists can meet with veterans on an individual basis. And everything is free: Orin says no veteran is charged for their visit.

"One of the biggest challenges that face the nonprofits is that none of them have a place like this, and sometimes the places aren't (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant," Orin adds. "Since I have 40 years of construction knowledge, I built this place to be compliant. We can get a wheelchair anywhere in the facility."

Having donated the 100 acres and spent the last 15 months building the lodge with the help of a few friends, Orin estimates a small fortune has been put into its creation. Generous donations from 35 corporations including North Central, Crowley Furniture in Kansas City and Window World of St. Louis made materials available for building the facility. Word of the getaway has spread in military and law enforcement circles. Orin estimates more than 100 veterans and active duty personnel have visited Hickory Hills from all corners of the U.S.

Although not a veteran himself, Orin has become a valued member of the military family. He was inducted as an honorary member of the now-deactivated 24th Marines Regiment for his work with the veterans, including helping with the annual Toys for Tots drive organized by the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Javier Sandoval, a neighbor of Orin's, says the

builder's motives are altruistic: he just wants his guests to relax, enjoy each other's company, have a great time and receive the help they so richly deserve.

"He's not doing it for any reason other than to give back and have a positive influence on someone," Javier says. "For a lot of veterans, especially those who don't have the ability to do this — or don't think they have the ability — he's here to help them get back out and do what they love doing."

Retired Army Staff Sgt. Shane Zavodny knows firsthand the joy to be found for veterans at Hickory Hills. The recipient of numerous decorations during his 21 years of service — including the Purple Heart — Shane was the first veteran to visit the property after the nonprofit was founded. He hadn't been hunting for years when a friend from church connected him with Orin. Now, Shane has a place to get back to the woods come deer season. He's also willing to help with the work at Hickory Hills because Orin's vision is contagious.

"What he does is totally different than any other organization," says Shane, who suffered a mild TBI in 2011 when his Humvee was hit by indirect fire and rolled down a mountain in Afghanistan. "He will help any veteran. Whereas some other organizations make you meet various criteria to attend, Hickory Hills does not."

Although not a requirement for veterans who visit the lodge there is plenty to do during the summer months between hunting seasons. There are trees to thin, native seed to replant on the property's bottomland and accessible hunting blinds to be installed. Orin says volunteers and veterans who want to be involved in these final stages of building and ongoing maintenance are more than welcome to lend a hand.

A difficult but important aspect of treatment for those coping with PTSD is readjusting to civilian life. Luckily, in addition to providing a place for outdoor recreation, Hickory Hills also connects veterans with a built-in support network: each other. Javier says sharing a weekend at the lodge with others who come from the same background and have similar experiences is important for a service member who might be coming off of active duty and starting school or a new job.

"It can be the saving grace for a lot of these veterans who can make a connection with somebody," Javier adds. "If they have another veteran there to talk to or help them out, it can do a lot for them."

While construction has been a labor of love, the process of getting Hickory Hills up and running is far from over. Orin continues to host veterans at the lodge, and he's also trying to raise capital and find much needed equipment. The yearly operating expense is estimated at between \$25,000 and \$35,000. It still needs three more beds and a tractor for maintenance, plus a truck and side-by-side utility vehicle for transporting disabled veterans around the property. To that end, Orin created a donations page on the lodge website and a GoFundMe page to help gather contributions.

Orin takes his role as facilitator of this healing process seriously, but he views it as small sacrifice compared to what those in military and law enforcement communities give up every day to do their jobs.

"Only through the public's support and generous donation's will be able to fund the work and help our nation's heroes," Orin says. "Veteran's aren't looking for handouts, just a hand up. And this is what we provide at Hickory Hills."

For more information, to make a donation or to volunteer at Hickory Hills Veterans Lodge, email Orin Jackson at orin@hickoryhillsveteranslodge.org, call 816-729-6443 or visit www.hickoryhillsveteranslodge.org.

