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Wounded Marine gets keys to Lake Keowee home

By Ray Chandler

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SENECA — When Jeffrey Pcola left home at the age of 17, his home became wherever around the world the U.S. Marine Corps sent him.

It took some time, Pcola said Saturday, to realize what it meant — that he was never able to give his children the roots of a permanent home.

A chief warrant officer, Pcola had 23 years of service when his effective career came to an end in a firefight along a road in Iraq in March 2003. His road to recovery, including 13 operations and years of therapy to overcome injuries to his neck, vertebrae, hip and spinal cord, hasn't been an easy one. But he sees one good thing for his family coming out of it.

Both children are grown now, his son, Cody, having followed his father's bootsteps into the Marines, his daughter, Megan, married to a Marine.

"But now they have a place to come home to," Pcola said.

On Saturday, the organization Homes for Our Troops presented to Pcola his new home on Maplewood Court in Waterside Cross subdivision on Lake Keowee. The house is one of two in the state that the Taunton, Mass.-based organization has built.

Like all houses the organization builds, it is especially designed to take into account the special needs of Pcola, who still has some difficulty walking and sometimes has to use a Segway scooter to get around.

"That's what we set out to do when this organization started," said Tom Benoit, vice president and chief financial officer of Homes for Our Troops. "What we want to do is do our part to see that when vets get back home they have a home they can get around in."

The organization has built about 90 homes over the past five years, has about 30 in progress and plans to build 100 more over the next three years, Benoit said. "These homes are a gift of freedom and independence for them, which is what they fought for for us."

The organization itself doesn't fund the houses but reaches out into the communities where it plans to build.

"It's people all over the nation that are stepping up and helping these vets. This is an example of what a community can do," said Joe Yoswa, director of communications of the Fluor Government Group and member of the Fluor Foundation's Military Support

Coalition. He spoke to a gathering of about 100 at Saturday's key presentation ceremony.

The Fluor Foundation was one of the prime movers of the project and a sponsor of the three-day Build Brigade that saw workers wading through mud to begin construction of Pcola's house on a rainy day in February.

Most of the work by area builders and craftsmen was volunteered, just as many of the materials used in the house were donated by local suppliers. Tom Markovich of Markovich Homes and Brad Kisker of Kisker Construction, Inc. were the contractors and major organizers of the actual construction.

"There are over two pages of names on the list of people who contributed to this," Markovich said, adding that underneath it all the effort was the theme of what it really meant to have a home.

"There is probably nothing that ties us more to the land than a home," he said. "It's our refuge. It's where we feel safe.

"That's why I like to build homes. But," he said, turning to Pcola, "real safety begins with that man right there and the sacrifices he made."

After being wounded, Pcola and his wife, Maria, moved to Pennsylvania to be close to his therapy. But with his permanent disabilities he had trouble living in a house built for a more mobile person. That, combined with the Pennsylvania cold, led them to look south.

Pcola has a brother living in Spartanburg, so South Carolina was a natural choice.

He had a Veterans Administration Specially Adapted Housing grant, which provides a maximum of about $64,000, to help make a home better fit his abilities, and then someone told him about Homes for Our Troops and helped him fill out the paperwork.

The result is the 2,616-square-foot house on Maplewood Court, with an open floor plan, wide hallways, hard-surfaced floors, roll-in showers and roll-under cook tops and sinks.

Builders on Saturday roughly estimated the house's value at between $400,000 and $500,000.

The home will mean independence for him and his family, Pcola said, and words alone couldn't convey his appreciation.

"It's up to us to become a part of this wonderful community and try to help others," he said.

He's looking forward to that, he said, and looking forward to another advantage of living near Lake Keowee: "All that good fishing I keep hearing about."

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