

Chapel for Homeless Vets Sold at Auction

• New Hampshire town didn't want safe haven for homeless veterans in spacious neighborhood

By Dave Gahary

Over 500,000 Americans remain homeless on any given night in this once-great nation. Now, a story out of the Granite State has many shaking their heads in disbelief. In the spring of 2015 when this newspaper covered the story of Marine Corps veteran Peter MacDonald's attempts to care for homeless combat veterans with his Veteran Resort Chapel in Lee, N.H., readers were shocked to learn that the town not only wanted no part in his selfless efforts, but they were intent on shutting them down. They're now on the verge of succeeding.

MacDonald, born in 1952 in Lynn, Mass., joined the Marines when he was 17 years old after his father caught him—a second time—fooling around with a girl in the house. It was two days before Christmas, and the youngster found himself homeless.

“He threw me out of the house and it was snowing, and the only place open when I hitched 40 miles to Manchester, N.H., was a Marine recruiter at 11:30 at night,” MacDonald told this reporter. “He told me if I signed a piece of paper, he'd put me up in a hotel room, so I signed the paper, and next thing I knew I woke up in Parris Island, S.C.”

After graduating and on his way home from boot camp, he suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car crash and lost his entire memory. “I had the mind of an infant, but I was in perfect physical shape, and after 60 days in the hospital, because of an admin error I was sent back to active duty,” he explained, getting shipped to Vietnam.

Plagued with multiple disabilities on combat missions, including a broken back, MacDonald finished his time in the Marine Corps and was discharged.

Making his way back home to New Hampshire, he had a hard time adjusting, and after 30 days ended up homeless on the streets of Portsmouth. “I spent the next several years living under a metal box out in the woods,” he explained, “until another Vietnam veteran found me and brought me to the VA, where they discovered I had four service-connected disabilities.”

MacDonald turned his life around with the help of the VA, his future wife, and kids. “We've been married 27 years,” he said, “and my three daughters graduated with master's degrees.”

It was, in fact, his family who came up with the idea to give back. “My wife and three daughters were sitting around the table one night, and they suggested that because I volunteered to help veterans all the time,” he explained, “that maybe it was time that we bought some property and donated it, and started a little chapel and tiny homes for homeless combat veterans where they can live free of charge with all utilities paid until



Above, the main house on the 11-acre property had pews and an altar for homeless vets who wanted to pray. But the town said it wasn't a real church.



Left, Peter MacDonald, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, just wanted to do something for America's homeless vets. Below, a fire-pit built for the chapel by multinational company Medtronic.



Left, MacDonald stands by a mini-home he erected on the property so a homeless vet might have a place to live. Currently, the property has not changed hands, as MacDonald included a revert clause in the deed.

The town's response to its homeless vets is a microcosm of the nation's failure on this issue.

they get back on their feet or they die.”

In 2012, the MacDonalds purchased 11 acres of waterfront property, started a nonprofit, and set it up so “for eternity” this property would be for the purpose of helping homeless combat veterans. “We built the church on it, and we've helped over 23 veterans so far; 15 of them have gotten their benefits or gotten their jobs and got back on their feet and now have their own apartments and they're living a good life, three of them have died, and the town evicted six of them from the property last December,” he said.

The church was built on the property because MacDonald is an ordained minister. “Since 1974 when I got back, even when I was homeless, I'd walk around and talk to homeless people,” he explained. “And when I found a veteran, I'd try to talk them into getting help. It became an obsession with me.”

Forty years on, MacDonald still pounds the

pavement. “So even today I still walk around—at least a couple of days a week—looking for homeless people in New England,” he said. “And when I find a veteran now, I buy them a McDonald's Happy Meal and a cup of coffee, and I talk to them about God and me and helping them come back to real life. Sometimes it helps and sometimes it doesn't, but that's what I'm doing with my minister's certificate. And that's why we built the chapel, because I wanted the veterans, no matter what faith they are or denomination, to have a place to go to pray and talk to the supreme being of their choice to try to come home mentally.”

MacDonald's property was a dream come true for homeless vets, but the town's elite didn't see it that way.

Toward the end of 2013, MacDonald's neighbor didn't want homeless combat veterans living across the street from him. He was on the planning board, so he conspired with a town selectman to shut down the shelter before the completion of the chapel's construction.

After many court battles, including a judge ruling that MacDonald's church is not a church, the town came in for the kill this year. “They gave us a writ of execution and fined us \$93,447.95,” MacDonald explained. “I refused to pay the money, and so the judge ordered the writ of execution auction,” where, in May, “\$500,000 worth of property sold for \$105,000.”

MacDonald is not giving up.

“This isn't over, yet. I cannot allow combat veterans to live out in the woods. Somebody has to fight for them,” MacDonald vows. ★