

Displaced, at loose ends

Closing veterans home in LR cast some adrift

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PHOTO BY [STEPHEN B. THORNTON](#)

Veteran John Kendall stands on the front porch of his new home Wednesday in North Little Rock.

“I had given up on myself and didn’t think there was any hope.”

John Kendall, a former Little Rock Veterans Home resident

When the Little Rock Veterans Home shut down in November 2012, Army veteran John Kendall was one of the last to leave.

He watched as the number of residents decreased from 70 in June to 40 in August and eventually dwindled to just three during his final days.

As the weeks ticked down, people asked Kendall what he would do once the home closed, and he would reply, “I’m waiting on a miracle to happen.” After six years in the home, the group of veterans had become his family, Kendall said, a family that he was unwilling to lose.

The closure was announced after inspectors estimated it would cost more than \$10 million to fix structural problems with the building at 4701 W. Charles Bussey Ave., which was one of Arkansas’

two state-run veterans homes. In addition, it was found that the Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs illegally had collected about \$600,000 in out-of-pocket fees from residents.

Martha Deaver, president of the Arkansas Advocates for Nursing Home Residents, organized a rally at the Capitol in August 2012 to urge lawmakers to fund a new veterans home. In March 2014, the Arkansas Legislature voted to appropriate \$7.5 million to match potential federal construction grants for a replacement home, which will be located near the Eugene J. Towbin Healthcare Center (Fort Roots) in North Little Rock.

However, there was no quick-fix for the displaced veterans.

"The men and women in the VA Little Rock home were just absolutely thrown out and taken away from their family," Deaver said Tuesday. "They were dispersed to different facilities across central Arkansas. I stayed in touch with many of them. Some of them got on drugs, some of them didn't make it. John Kendall almost didn't make it."

After leaving the home in October, Kendall spent one month at St. Francis House in Little Rock, which provides transitional housing for homeless veterans. From there, he bounced around, briefly staying at a friend's home before moving into an apartment of his own.

Kendall said he has a history of substance abuse, and he found himself "surrounded with drugs" at the apartment. He no longer had people monitoring his medication, organizing his bills or taking him to appointments.

He went back to using drugs, and then ended up on the streets. A suicide attempt landed him in an intensive-care unit, he said.

"I had given up on myself and didn't think there was any hope," Kendall recalled of that time.

On June 25, less than a year after the suicide attempt, Kendall, now 60, moved into a brand-new, single-story, three-bedroom, two-bathroom home in North Little Rock. His hope restored, Kendall has set his sights on a new goal: re-creating the veterans community he lost.

After he was released from the hospital, Veterans Villages of America, a local organization headed by retired Army Col. Mike Ross, helped Kendall secure the home through Habitat for Humanity, which provided him with a no-interest mortgage. Veterans Villages of America is working to create a network of veterans in North Little Rock's Baring Cross neighborhood, minutes away from Fort Roots.

Ross and other members of the group have found and furnished housing for three veterans so far, two of whom used to live in the Little Rock Veterans Home, and Ross has expansion plans. He wants the group to buy land, build houses and find veterans to put in them.

Ross and several others were emboldened to form the group after the closure of the Little Rock Veterans Home about two years ago.

"We were all very frustrated," Ross said. "We're not saying that the veterans home didn't need to shut down, but we were frustrated because no one had a plan."

The group's goal to get veterans in houses close to one another to help revive the camaraderie that existed in the veterans home. Ross, who said he wants to "think big and scale back if I need to," even hopes to one day build an all-purpose community center in the neighborhood.

The first step of the group's plan was put into action in mid-June. Days before Kendall moved into his new home on Sycamore Street, Veterans Villages of America helped Army veteran John Kusturin move into his house a few blocks away on Schaer Street.

For the first time, Kusturin hosted his family's Fourth of July get-together this year.

He and about 10 family members gathered for a potluck Friday to celebrate the holiday as well as Kusturin's personal independence just two weeks after the 51-year-old Persian Gulf War veteran moved out of his sister's house and into a home of his own.

"We're right here together," Kusturin said of the new community. "That way we're always looking out for each other."

Kendall wants to give back, he said, by telling other veterans about the opportunity he and Kusturin were given and encouraging them to try for the same.

"Those years that I was at the veterans home were probably some of the best years of my adult life," Kendall said. "I made some real good friends, and I became a part of something that was bigger than myself. I was a part of a veterans family."

Leaned back in a recliner in his new home, wearing an Army T-shirt and cap, with Ross sitting nearby, Kendall said he feels like part of a family again: "I'm excited to be part of this new community," he said. "I've found my miracle."

"And it's up to you to keep it," Ross added.

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