

A Chain of Friends – Ramps to Renovations

Patrick J Tracy

Ray has had kidney dialysis three times a week for six years. This has drained his strength. But as a World War II veteran, Ray knows how to fight. Even from a wheelchair.

And he hasn't faced every fight alone. Last year, Ray's home caregivers saw a physical risk in his trailer in west Oakland County and reported it to their company. That call sparked a chain of concerned actions that changed how Ray lives after friends and strangers took up his cause.

Finding a Connection

Ray's caregivers wanted a safer ramp to move him into and out of his home. Ray's two makeshift 8-foot plywood boards lacked rails. Rain and snow made them slick.

When Margot Bloomfield, Trillium HomeCare's quality control manager, learned of the problem, she didn't have a ready solution. So she decided to create one.

She began calling government agencies and elderly and veterans' support groups asking for answers. People she called wanted to help Ray, but couldn't. Because they cared, they usually gave her someone else to call.

Like Ray, Margot wouldn't give up. She kept asking.

At last she reached Bob Scott of the Wixom Veterans of Foreign Wars, Post 2269. When Bob learned that a World War II veteran needed help, he thought of David Johnson. A veteran himself and an American Legion member, Dave owns a small construction company in Milford called Total Remod.

Just a few years ago, Dave was spending all day on the phone driving between sites to manage his many projects. Today's economy has taken away Dave's clipboard and put power tools back in his hands. That's fine with him. Dave has always enjoyed helping people by using the tools that built his business.

Bob explained Ray's needs, and Dave quickly decided to help: Other work was slow. And he'd recently bought some surplus ramps from a friend's company.

Trillium HomeCare introduced Dave and Ray. They quickly grew to respect each other.

In late November last year, Dave spent four hours setting up the project, then two hours installing two twelve-foot ramps at Ray's trailer, donating the ramps and his time.

Thanking New Friends

Touched, Ray wanted to thank Dave and Bob for their generosity. Trillium HomeCare helped Ray thank them by arranging to take Ray to the Wixom VFW to present them with a card and small gift to show his appreciation. People who attended remember Ray's emotions and how his eyes shone.

That day, Dave learned that the ramps were Ray's first problem, not his only one. Ray's home needed other remodeling for wheel-chair access. Doors on both of Ray's bathrooms were too narrow for his wheelchair to enter. Ray's main bathroom needed a new floor plan with enough room for his wheelchair to move and turn.

Ray wanted – and deserved – to stay in his home, with safety and some independence, despite his health issues. That's why he paid for home care.

Dave talked to Ray later about the renovations. By then, Ray had called another contractor for an estimate. When the price to widen just one doorway topped \$900, Ray wondered how he could ever pay for all of the work he needed.

Facing the Challenge

Dave wanted to do more for Ray. But he knew that even buying materials for this work would mean big costs. Dave decided to ask friends to help, as Bob had asked him. These friends, many also veterans, understand the honor of collective sacrifice for a cause.

Dave created and passed out a brochure. Soon he was talking about Ray's needs to friends at the American Legion, the Bisons, the Eagles of Walled Lake, the Sons of the American Legion, and the Wixom VFW post. The service organizations met and calculated. Dave asked patrons at Stinger's Bar and Grill and Jenni's Restaurant to donate. Inspired by Ray's story, everyone who turned in gifts raised nearly \$5,500. Dave even convinced five friends to work on the project.

With money for materials, Dave set to work. He also donated his labor, other materials, and some funds to give his fellow veteran Ray the bathrooms he needed. The changes would have cost many times the cash raised had Ray been forced to pay market prices.

Dave started by widening the door of Ray's second bathroom so Ray could use it while Dave worked. Then Dave and his friends started knocking out walls, widening the door, redoing the floor plan, replacing walls, and installing new fixtures, hand railings, an accessible tub, and a shower. The work took several weeks.

Making a Difference

Ray treasures his independence. Now he can more easily do things most of us take for granted that he needed help with before Dave made changes.

A chain of caring people saw a veteran in need, someone who had fought unselfishly for us all, years ago. They couldn't walk away, leaving Ray to solve his own problems. They helped: Dave and his friends, the civic groups and the people who raised and donated money, Bob, Margot, and Trillium HomeCare's caregivers.

The work of Dave and his friends, using donated money, sparked by concerned caregivers and Margot's phone calls, changed how Ray lives each day.

Growing in Friendship

Working on the project, Dave had grown to feel less like Ray's contractor and more like his friend. One day, looking at the nearly finished work, Dave realized that, while everything was new in Ray's bathroom, something was still missing. What was it? He pictured other bathrooms he had built. And his own. Then he realized what Ray needed.

Ray deeply appreciates what a chain of caring friends and strangers did for him. He thinks about them when he wheels past his transformed bathroom. And he loves the new towels Dave gave him as the final touch for his bathroom.

When Dave thinks of the project, he recalls what Ray said one day, "This room, Dave, is the nicest room in my house."

Organizations that helped Ray:

- **Trillium Home Care** (www.TrilliumHomeCare.com)
- **Total Remod** (248 939 0667 or totalremod@hotmail.com – Attn: Dave)
- **VFW Post 22699** (<http://home.comcast.net/~vfwpost2269>)
- **Sons of the American Legion** [248 624 9722, Wixom post]
- **Stinger's Bar and Grill** (www.stingersbarwixom.com)
- **Jenni's Restaurant**, 1186 E West Maple, Walled Lake, MI 48390, 248 669 8240
- **Fraternal Order of Eagles (3492)**, 1721 Glengary, Walled Lake, MI 48390, 248 624 7933
- **Bisons** (The Bisons Sportsmans Club is in the VFW Post 2269)
- **American Legion** (<http://home.comcast.net/~vfwpost2269/>)

People who contributed substantial construction labor:

- Stan Calough
- Rick Dillenger
- Jim Drennens
- Martin MaMan
- Don Parini
- Jack Stermer