



BUILDING HOMES FOR HEROES

CHI Memorial physical therapy technician devotes her time off work to providing accessible, mortgage-free homes to disabled veterans

At CHI Memorial, our team incorporates values of compassion, inclusion, integrity, excellence and collaboration into their daily roles, and they also proudly integrate these beliefs into their community. For physical therapy technician Carly Stephens, her calling has been helping veterans.

After seeing the impact her sister and brother-in-law had on veterans through the local nonprofit organization A Soldier's Journey Home, Stephens felt called to also become a volunteer. In 2015, she began helping the nonprofit and traveling to cities across the United States to build homes for veterans who were wounded or disabled from their time in the service.

"I knew I needed to help because I loved their mission and vision," says Stephens.

Since then, she has helped build six homes for six deserving warriors and their families.

Each build spearheaded by A Soldier's Journey Home takes only 12 days to complete and is typically within

driving distance from the organization's home base in Chattanooga. Volunteers pay for their own travel to the city of the build. The nonprofit provides lodging, and community members in the veteran's town show support by supplying meals for the 100-150 volunteers who show up to each home build. The volunteers range from firefighters, police officers, first responders, contractors, and more – all with the same mission to help serve those who have risked their lives serving our country.

One of the most significant ways this organization shows its appreciation for veterans is by providing them with a feeling of inclusion. This hits home for Stephens – the granddaughter of a veteran.

"Veterans have given so much to our country, and they're not always appreciated when they get home," says Stephens. "A lot of time, people with disabilities feel left out, so making the homes accessible helps them feel included and shows them they can be independent."

Stephens plays an integral role in ensuring the homes

are accessible for the veterans and their families. She focuses on cleaning and furnishing the house, so it immediately feels like home as they walk through their new front door. Stephens says her role at CHI Memorial helps her recognize the additions a home should have to make it more accessible.

“In physical therapy, we focus on the importance of patients doing everything safely in their daily life. I’m able to take that mentality and set the homes up so they are functional and safe for the veterans to be fully independent.”

These homes help meet the veteran’s accessibility needs, as well as release a huge financial burden. The homes that A Soldier’s Journey Home builds are completely mortgage-free and fully furnished, leaving veterans with a sense of relief and security.

“It’s a feeling I can’t describe,” Stephens says as she holds back tears. “Seeing the looks of the person and their family and witnessing the burden lifted off their shoulders as they realize this is their forever home – it’s something that you can’t put into words. I cry more the week I’m on-site at the builds than the rest of the year combined. The impact it makes on you – it’s life-changing for everyone.”

Stephens describes the organization as an extended family, stating the best part of the home builds is collaborating with the 100-150 dedicated volunteers who continue to show up year after year and spread humankindness into the community.

says she tries to show compassion in all that she does, knowing the impact it can have on others.

“My entire life, I’ve had a passion for helping other people. Whether it be through my work with physical therapy or volunteering, that’s who I am as a person – that’s what I love to do. A Soldier’s Journey Home just fell into my lap as another way to show humankindness – doing whatever little thing I can do to help someone, and that’s what keeps me going back.”

A MISSION TO SERVE THOSE WHO SERVED

After the tragic events of 9/11, New York City Fire Department firefighters began volunteering at locations destroyed by natural disasters across the country and teamed up with first responders who shared their passion for rebuilding communities. In 2014, they established A Soldier’s Journey Home. The organization is now based in Chattanooga. The mission of A Soldier’s Journey Home is to galvanize the local community with volunteers from across the country and build a specially-adapted, mortgage-free home for a veteran with disabilities, giving back to them for the sacrifices they made on behalf of our country.

- Each home takes 12 days to build.
- Volunteers build one fully furnished, mortgage-free home every year for a veteran.
- Since 2014, seven homes have been built across Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Tennessee, and Texas.
- For more information, visit ASoldiersJourneyHome.org.

“It has made me a more compassionate person. I leave the house builds feeling like there is good in the world – there are good people. Each mission makes me a better person.”

Stephens recently returned to school to become a physical therapy assistant, so she can continue to provide support to those in need in the hospital setting. Whether it is through work or volunteering, she

CARLY STEPHENS, BS

1 YEAR

PHYSICAL THERAPY TECHNICIAN

HOSPITAL CHATTANOOGA

