

LOCAL NEWS

Formerly homeless veteran couple receives home makeover courtesy of Fontana nonprofit, others



Navy veterans Heather Phillips and Sherwin Sanchez, along with their daughter Sulianna, 1, react with tears of joy after seeing their apartment for the 1st time after it was remodeled with new furnishings and decorations on Friday, September 14, 2018. At right is Vickie Lobo, founder of Knock Knock Angels, who helped organize the makeover. (Photo by Stan Lim, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

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SAN BERNARDINO – Sherwin Sanchez woke up Friday, Sept. 14, feeling familiarly uneasy.

In a few hours, strangers and new friends from Fontana nonprofit Knock Knock Angels and AMVETS Post 77 in Loma Linda would be inside his family's San Bernardino apartment, assembling new, donated furniture from Ashley HomeStore's West Covina location and the community at-large.

A joyous day by all accounts, but after a lifetime of shunning help, Sanchez, a disabled and formerly homeless veteran, still is learning that it's OK to let people in.

"It took a long time before I decided I needed to get help," he said. "I don't know what made me stop to get help, I just know I was tired."

Sanchez, 41, and his girlfriend Heather Phillips, herself a veteran, have heard their share of broken promises.

On Friday, a promise to remodel their two-bedroom apartment was kept.

"This has opened my eyes to how real people's kindness and generosity can be," Sanchez said a few hours before stepping into his newly-refurbished home. "It's not a falsity or staged, it's not a TV show. It's real. It is absolutely real. And if that can be real, there's no limit to what I can do."

For about five years, Knock Knock Angels has provided neglected elderly people, single parents and women escaping domestic abuse new home furnishings. The community is a key partner, founder Vickie Lobo said, with donations of furniture, transportation and, most importantly, time.

Since January, the nonprofit has refurbished more than a dozen houses in Southern California.

Friday's effort brought Lobo to tears.

"I say all the time, 'This one is the best one,'" she said. "But *this one* is the best one, because I want to see (Sanchez) do well so bad."



Waking up uneasy isn't new to Sanchez, who, like millions of veterans, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Originally from the Philippines, Sanchez said he joined his parents stateside at age 9. He lived in Long Beach and then in Cerritos, and said he was picked on in school for not knowing English. He attended Artesia High and said he served in the Navy from 1995 to 2003.

Sanchez said he started drinking heavily in 1999 to cope with issues in his life. His six-year marriage dissolved in 2012, and he drank through and after his discharge, while struggling to acclimate to life as a civilian.

He became homeless for a time and said he attempted suicide in 2013, before entering rehab. He found shelter at a sober living house, then his own apartment, but became homeless again after losing his job as a drug and alcohol counselor.

Today, his PTSD continues. Outbursts, nightmares, seeing things others don't.

"Pretty scary stuff," he said. "Unless there are other veterans that understand, or a veterans organization that understands, people see that behavior and it's downright frightening."

Phillips, meanwhile, graduated from Huntington Beach High in 2006, the school's 100th graduating class.

She joined the military on her 19th birthday, but said she was raped, and to this day, suffers from PTSD related to military sexual trauma.

Drugs helped Phillips numb the pain. She had a daughter in her 20s and would surrender her to the child's father to get clean. Phillips, now 30, got out of treatment in December 2015, relapsed shortly thereafter and met Sanchez a few months later.

The couple lived in Long Beach, on minimal incomes, for a spell in 2016, until they were served eviction papers about a week after Phillips gave birth to their daughter, Sulianna. They lived briefly in a friend's Lake Arrowhead house, working mundane jobs, begging for a break, Phillips said.

Earlier this year, Sanchez went to the Department of Veterans Affairs for help, and said Friday his quality of life has greatly improved with medication and therapy.

After visiting the VA, KEYS, a San Bernardino nonprofit assisting economically disadvantaged veterans and their families, helped Sanchez obtain an apartment voucher through the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program.

While waiting for a permanent place to stay, Sanchez, Phillips and Sulianna moved into a Motel 6 in San Bernardino. As their savings dwindled and their cupboards lay bare, they said they subsisted by rationing food.

About a month ago, Sanchez's VA claim came through. He was classified as 70 percent mentally disabled and guaranteed a monthly income. Phillips later found full-time housekeeping work at the Loma Linda VA.

"We've definitely had more hard times than good," Sanchez said. "But if a couple can struggle together, they can definitely flourish together."

Last month, they moved into their San Bernardino apartment with borrowed furniture.

Thanks to Lobo, Commander Yolanda Smith with AMVETS Post 77 and Ashley HomeStore West Covina store manager Charles Serrano, the couple received Knock Knock Angels' latest home makeover.

Phillips, who will celebrate two years of sobriety on Oct. 4, said Friday morning that these past few weeks still don't feel real.

"It's so hard to catch up when you're always behind," she said. "We were doing everything right, doing what we were supposed to be doing, staying sober, looking for employment, focusing on family, and things still weren't coming together.

"We needed a break," she added, "and that's what we got with the (Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing) program, getting an apartment and with Knock Knock Angels."

On Friday, volunteers helped build and arrange the couple's new furniture while Sanchez, Phillips and Sulianna enjoyed a day at Chuck E. Cheese. The big reveal brought several people, including the formerly homeless veteran couple, to tears.

Shortly after embracing Lobo and Smith and taking rounds of pictures, Sanchez sat down in the living room.

"This is my couch," he said.

For more information on Knock Knock Angels, visit knockknockangels.org or call 909-543-2978.

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Brian Whitehead covers San Bernardino for The Sun. Bred in Grand Terrace, he graduated from Riverside Notre Dame High and Cal State Fullerton. For seven years, he covered high school and college sports for The Orange County Register. Before landing at The Sun, he was the city beat reporter for Buena Park, Fullerton and La Palma.

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