



Home Away from Home

FISHER HOUSE WISCONSIN NEWS

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Message from the President



It's been five years since Fisher House at the Zablocki VA opened its doors! On one hand, it's hard to believe it's already been five years. On the other hand, it's hard to imagine the

Zablocki VA Medical Center without a Fisher House as it has become such an integral and important part of the service being provided to the Veterans and their families when they are in Milwaukee. With over 3,000 families already served, it gives us all great joy to know that we're just getting started. There is so much good work & opportunity ahead of us – in large measure thanks to our generous donors and wonderful volunteers. While the COVID pandemic provided us ALL with many challenges, we sincerely appreciate the ongoing support from our donors and the patience of our volunteers this past year. Thank you!

Speaking of opportunity, as you've no doubt heard, the Veterans Administration Medical Center (VAMC) in Middleton/Madison, WI was placed on a "priority list" by the VA in Washington, DC last December for construction of a new Fisher House. This is great news! Many in our state have been working and advocating for years on behalf of the VAMC Middleton, so we're delighted to see it make the list. The next step will be for the VA and Fisher House Foundation to agree upon an actual building site. We're hopeful this can happen yet this year. After that construction plans will be developed, and as a supporting organization, Fisher House Wisconsin will begin to raise greater awareness and the necessary funding to support the new house, which will in turn support even more Veteran families for years to come!

In February, the Fisher House Wisconsin board of directors approved a new and expanded

strategic plan, partially in response to the news of the VAMC Middleton/Madison Fisher House announcement. We expanded our vision and mission to provide more support to Veterans and their families throughout "VISN 12" – Veterans Integrated Service Network, from Milwaukee to Madison to the Fox Valley and beyond. The VA Great Lakes Health Care System or VISN 12, is a group of eight VA medical centers and nearly 40 VA clinics, dedicated to providing a comprehensive health care package to America's veterans. VA Great Lakes serves veterans who reside in Illinois, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Wisconsin, and northwestern Indiana. While our focus continues to be on the southeast and south-central part of Wisconsin with the VAMC's in Milwaukee & Madison, our Veterans & their families travel from a much wider region. Again, with a huge "thank you" to our generous donors, we envision providing additional assistance to them as they seek much needed

2021 Event details can be found at fisherhousewi.org/events

We look forward to seeing you this summer and fall at our upcoming events as we celebrate our support of Veterans and their families. Our annual golf outing was a big hit last year, and it's sure to be a lot of fun again this year – in addition to being a great opportunity to connect with many Veterans. Brewers Community Foundation will be supporting Fisher House Wisconsin once again this year with their virtual *5K Famous Racing Sausages Run/Walk*. The Fisher House team was the largest team last year – so let's see if we can do it again this year! This fall will be the 14th Annual *Big Unit Poker Run* with board member Bill Michaels leading the way. Our VP, Angie Christianson, has promised to give me a ride on her bike this year. It should be a lot of fun – please join us. And as always, thank you again for all your support.

—Dirk Debbink, President

Veterans supporting Veterans and their families

By Justin Woulf

Through TC Energy Foundation, the Badger Area Operations team was able to donate \$20,000 in 2020 – a significant and ideally incredibly impactful amount to a program that does a huge amount of good for Wisconsin’s Veteran’s and their families through Fisher House Wisconsin. The impact Fisher House has on those service members and their families returning home when seeking treatment is instrumental in minimizing the stress associated with medical care.

TC Energy moves approximately 25% of the natural gas demand in North America—of which directly heats homes, runs power plants, as well as hospitals and their facilities. TC Energy additionally supports numerous veteran programs across both US and Canada throughout the year – with special events occurring on Veterans and Remembrance Day. TC Energy Foundation is always looking to

support and contribute to organizations having significant positive impacts, especially those that mean something to their employees – matching contributions of individuals as well as leveraging corporate giving programs.

I and several members of the team have served over the years, as do family members of employees – creating a connection to service that is universal and impactful. We have members of the team who have personally served in the nearly every branch of the service – as well as their children. I enlisted in 2007, commissioned in 2010, and served on active duty in the US Army for seven years – primarily stationed at Fort Riley, KS being a part of the 1-28 IN Battalion, 4th IBCT, 1 Infantry Division – deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2012-2013 to East Paktika, Afghanistan. Serving was an experience that ultimately shaped

me as an individual and continues to influence how I operate today – and something I am thankful for being



apart of. While there are numerous organizations that do a lot of good for veterans and their families, the impact Fisher House can and does have is monumental and can’t be understated. Caring for the families of service members, often in times of their greatest stresses during medical events, is a noble effort that is wildly deserving of support.

I am incredibly thankful for the support TC Energy Foundation was able to provide and hopeful the impact is lasting and can support those in need.

**WELL DONE:
Greg Fischer and Ben Kreple
of Burn Pit BBQ raise
funds for Fisher House of
Wisconsin**

By Rebecca Seymour

Greg Fischer was a senior in high school when 9/11 shook our nation at its core, launching the War on Terror and a military campaign that continues 20 years later. “I graduated in 2002 and joined the Marine Corps, served in the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, and was deployed to Iraq three times,” explained Greg. “Being deployed three times in four years took a toll on my health and body. Integrating back into society was challenging.”

Fischer enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, earning his bachelor’s in business and finance while also playing



Bill Michaels, FHW Director, accepting check from Greg Fischer, co-owner of Burn Pit BBQ, and Dan Della, owner of The Social Haus.

on the college’s soccer team. “I wanted to meet people and get excited about my personal life again. I met Ben Kreple playing soccer for Parkside and we have been connected ever since,” added Greg.

The two friends bought houses next to each other and soon discovered they had a shared interest in spending time BBQing in their backyards. “I am passionate

about grilling – it really is therapy and a stress relief for me. I had been working at Northwestern Mutual for 10 years, and decided I needed to go out and try something different. So last summer, during a pandemic, I left my corporate career, and Ben and I started our new business, Burn Pit BBQ,” said Greg.

Giving back

Burn Pit BBQ’s slogan, *Driven by Flavor, Connected by Service* is a testament to Greg and Ben’s commitment to running a veteran-owned venture that pledges to support veterans and their families. “It’s important for us to give back to those who served in this way. Every month we want to highlight an organization that supports military veterans, families, and those currently serving,” said Greg.

In February, Greg and Ben teamed up with WarPigs Brewing USA and The Social Haus in Menomonee Falls for an event featuring great food, drink, raffles, and a

continued on next page



Second Fisher House in Wisconsin Planned for Madison VA Grounds

At the end of 2020, the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital was prioritized by VA Secretary Robert Wilkie as a future site for a Fisher House construction project.

A Fisher House is “a home away from home” for families of patients receiving medical care at major military and VA medical centers. Many families travel from long distances to receive care or to be with their loved ones during medical treatment. Families often face the burden of finding lodging while trying to be by the side of their hospitalized loved one. A Fisher House on the Madison VA campus or within proximity of the medical center would make lodging accommodations available and at no cost to guests.

“At the Fisher House, we treat our guests like family, and we work really hard to meet all their needs, so they can focus their attention on caring for their loved one.” said Angie Christianson, Fisher House

Wisconsin Vice President and Fisher House volunteer. Fisher House is designed with the interactions of guests in mind and provides a home-like environment to help reduce the burden of being away from home.

Fisher House Wisconsin will collaborate with the staff at the Madison VA to help make the Fisher House a reality. “This is great news for Wisconsin and for the many Veterans and families that Fisher House will have the opportunity to support,” said Dirk Debbink, Fisher House Wisconsin President.

Timelines for construction will be contingent on land acquisition and other competing Fisher House Foundation project priorities. When this construction project moves forward to completion, this will make a total of two Fisher Houses in the State of Wisconsin. The first one opened in April of 2016 at the Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Hospital in Milwaukee. As the house celebrates its five-year anniversary of its opening, more than 3,000 guests have

found lodging at the house. “We look forward to working with the staff at William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital and replicating the amazing working relationship that we’ve enjoyed at the Milwaukee VA,” said Debbink.

Fisher House Wisconsin is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization which funds expenses associated with the construction and operation of Fisher Houses in Wisconsin. Fisher House currently provides a “home away from home” for families of patients receiving medical care at the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, WI.

For more information on Fisher House Wisconsin, go fisherhousewi.org or www.facebook.com/fisherhousewi For more information about the Madison VA Hospital, visit www.madison.va.gov or www.facebook.com/MadisonVAHospital



In honor of a loved one, FHW's 5-year Anniversary, or Memorial Day, consider making a donation to Fisher House Wisconsin. Donations can be made online or by mail:

MAIL: Fisher House Wisconsin, PO Box 13768 Milwaukee, WI 53226

ONLINE: FisherHouseWI.org

BURN PIT BBQ, continued silent auction that raised \$2,300 for Fisher House Wisconsin. “The crowd was really great and there was a lot of energy. We were excited to get out there to showcase our brand while supporting Fisher House,” said Greg. “For me personally, I know how challenging it can be for vets and families, especially if they need to be cared for through the VA, and the Fisher House can take away some of that burden. It means so much to be able to help them.”

Volunteers Help Make Fisher House Wisconsin

By Michelle M. Friedman

The volunteers at Fisher House Wisconsin (FHW) are second to none. Milwaukee VA Fisher House Manager, Jennifer Kiefer, highlighted a list of the Milwaukee VA Fisher House volunteers who have been with the house since it opened. She noted that despite the recent pandemic, volunteers: **Rusty Armstrong, Julie Cavey, Ron Cohn, Ken Gipp, Michelle Harker, Marie Hudson, Jackie Ignatowski, Jim Ignatowski, Paul Javins, Maggie Krawczyk, Wendy Pribbanow, Mareta Prill, Kathy Refsell, Kathy Schroeder and Elaine Seitz**, have all remained engaged in the mission.

Recently, FHW spoke with longtime volunteer Kathy Schroeder, who shared her insights about her time with FHW and what she finds most rewarding.

What do you find most rewarding?

I am honored to be the Volunteer Coordinator at Fisher House and especially enjoy working with the volunteers. Each



Kathy and her husband, Dick, a Vietnam Veteran.

and every one is special in their own way. They are so generous with their time and talents. We are truly a cohesive, dedicated group. I enjoy organizing activities and coordinating events. I also enjoy meeting the families and, when appropriate, listening to their stories or offering a hug. Being a good listener is one of the qualities of a good volunteer at Fisher House.

Do you have a unique memory or thought to share regarding your volunteer time with FHW?

There are so many unique memories; it would be difficult to pin down something specific. One of our volunteers designs a picture book which is helpful in reminding

us all that was accomplished during the year. It's a great way to reflect on the memories. I enjoy giving tours to visitors, accepting donations from our very generous community, and gathering our volunteers for celebratory events. The meals cooked by the Meal Train® community groups are always memorable, and it is truly inspiring when school groups or Scouts come to the house to learn about volunteerism, Fisher House, and our Veterans.

If someone were interested in volunteering with FHW, what would your words of wisdom be to potential volunteers?

My words of wisdom, again, would be around listening. Often family members are very stressed and there is a lot of anxiety. Volunteers need to know when to talk, when to listen, when to offer encouragement, and especially when to hug (and when NOT to!).

As we celebrate our five-year anniversary, FHW would like to thank its volunteers, donors, corporate sponsors, and others for their continued support. It is through your kindness and generosity that FHW continues its mission.

Donor Contributions November 2020–March 2021

IN HONOR OF

All Veterans
Alois G. Krzykowski
Christopher Niemiec
Daniel Schwartz
David Daniels
David Retherford
Dick Swatek
Don Brining
Donald Wnuk, Jr.
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Richard Langer
Robert Bletzinger
Robert Haley
Robert Taylor

Sonia Douglas
Stephanie Dermond
Suzy Foster
Teri Schmidt
Terri Fisher
The Debbink Family

IN MEMORY OF

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William Tietz
William W. Blackburn
Willis & Scott Hoffman



Bob King served in the U.S. Army. He was a refueler for the Cobra helicopters and later worked on the Mohawk while deployed during the Vietnam War.

Forever Young & Proud to Serve

By Andrea Potthast

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Kathy King and her daughter, Amy. The King family made a generous donation to Fisher House Wisconsin. I wanted to know why.

Bob was a man with a generous heart. Despite his health problems, related to his exposure to Agent Orange, he spent his time giving back. He did this by supporting Veterans and organization that supported Veterans. He joined Pointmen International Ministry, a ministry that focused on helping Veterans make peace with their past. He counseled many in need of direction and healing. He also started Warrior's Rest during the last five years of his life. "He was a wonderful Christian man," explained Kathy. Bob's passion for helping Veterans extended to Veterans' families, which is why Kathy decided to donate to

Fisher House Wisconsin. "We wanted to look for things that Bob would enjoy giving to." She recalled a story that Bob often told about a non-for-profit selling donuts and coffee to deploying soldiers in '67. He couldn't believe it. He thought generosity should come easily – not at a profit, so he always looked for organizations with that same philosophy.

"He taught me that family means everything," his daughter, Amy, shared. Bob officially joined God's army on Good Friday of last year. He left behind a legacy of service that his family carries on. Kathy was six months old when she met Bob – they were longtime friends before they became sweethearts. Just shy of their 50-year wedding anniversary, Kathy remembered her husband as young at heart. "I was married to a 20-year-old." said smiled.

Thank you to the King family for your gift to Fisher House Wisconsin and for sharing Bob's legacy with us.

Reflecting on Five Years

By Jennifer Kiefer

My name is Jennifer Kiefer, I am honored to be the manager of the Fisher House at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. As we celebrate the five-year anniversary of the house, I would like to reflect on this amazing program at the VA.

In five years, the house staff, volunteers, and I have welcomed more than 3,000 families. Guest families have stayed with us anywhere from one night to seven months, so that they can be at their hospitalized loved one's bedside. Families have come from all over the United States and even from as far as Germany. We have watched separate families check in as strangers and check out as close friends.

We have welcomed new volunteers into the house who soon became valuable assets to the day-to-day operation of this home. Great bonds and friendships have been formed with community partners, school groups, church groups and other organizations.

The kitchen—the true heart of the home—has been filled with the delightful smells of homemade meals along with laughter and hugs. The dining room has been the place to celebrate holidays and events that honor our Veteran caregivers

and volunteers. The festive decorations welcome each season or holiday and are often paired with a fun gathering and meal.

All these traditions, gatherings and celebrations abruptly stopped in March 2020 with the onset of the COVID pandemic. Day-to-day life at the Fisher House was very different, and the staff worked tirelessly to keep the environment safe and clean for those in need of lodging. We are extremely grateful and proud to say we were able to keep our doors open throughout the pandemic. We prepared to support our front-line VA workers with lodging needs, partnered with Fisher House Wisconsin to financially support hotel lodging for families (if it was needed), and adapted Fisher House to make it a "COVID safe" home.

Looking back at the past year, although fewer families stayed with us, we know those families counted on us more than ever to support their needs. We grieve the year of traditions skipped, celebrations canceled, and volunteers missed, but we have faith we will resume the normal spirit of Fisher House operations and truly be a "home away from home" once again.

I would like to give special thanks to the Fisher House staff – Maixiong, Shawn,



Jennifer Kiefer, House Manager, with Angie Christianson, VP FHW celebrating the five-year anniversary of the house.

Shanicka and Larry – who wore many hats to ensure the house was clean and appropriate precautions were in place for our guests and staff. They embraced the challenge of implementing COVID-safety protocols and remained diligent with the ever-changing guidelines and requests.

I would also like to thank our friend and community partner; Fisher House Wisconsin, for its endless support with pretty much ANYTHING we need, and finally the support and encouragement of our dedicated volunteers. A week did not go by in the past year without emails or calls from them checking in, asking what they can do and when they can come back. We look forward to having our "Fisher House family" back together and many more years of anniversaries to celebrate!



Upcoming Events

June 19 – 2021 Sherwood Forest Veterans Archery Shoot
Sussex, WI

June 26 – 6th Annual VFW Post 11038 Golf Outing
Waterford, WI

July 17 – 23rd Annual VIRTUAL 5K Famous Racing Sausages Run/Walk

August 30 – 9th Annual Fisher House Wisconsin Golf Outing
Geneva National Resort & Club

September 5 – The Big Unit's Motorcycle Poker Run

Check out our complete and detailed events calendar at fisherhousewi.org/events



Milwaukee VA Fisher House Celebrates Five Years

By Michelle M. Friedman

Five years ago, on April 23, 2016, the Milwaukee VA Fisher House officially opened its doors and became the first Fisher House in the state of Wisconsin. The home is conveniently located on the grounds of the Clement J. Zablocki Veteran Affairs Medical Center in Milwaukee. Since opening, it has been a “home away from home” to more than 3,000 families.

Families in need of lodging, can stay at the Milwaukee VA Fisher House at no cost while their veteran or active-duty service family member receives medical care at the VA. This allows families to stay close while their loved-one receives care. The Fisher House 16-suite, 13,500 sq.-ft. home, which was funded via a collaboration between Fisher House Foundation and Fisher House Wisconsin (FHW), has provided respite to many. During the house dedication ceremony, the keys to the house were turned over to the VA and House Manager, Jennifer Kiefer, who are responsible for the operation and maintenance of the house. Over the years, as the VA operates the home, FHW continues to support the needs of families staying at the home by funding expenses associated with the operation of the home and guests’ needs.

The five-year anniversary of the Milwaukee VA Fisher House comes on the heels of the announcement that FHW will partner with the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital to construct Wisconsin’s second Fisher House, which will be in Madison. “This is great news for Wisconsin and for the many Veterans and families that Fisher House will have the opportunity to support,” Dirk Debbink, FHW President.

The Milwaukee VA Fisher House would not exist but for the generosity of its supporters. Throughout the years FHW has received tremendous assistance from countless volunteers, board members, donors, corporate sponsors, and others. The funds raised during FHW’s flagship events, the annual Golf Outing and Motorcycle Poker Run, help sustain the FHW mission. The 2021 Golf Outing is scheduled for August 30 at Geneva National Resort and Club and the Poker Run is scheduled for September 5th.

As we celebrate this five-year anniversary, FHW would like to thank its volunteers, donors, corporate sponsors, and others for their continued support. It is through your kindness and generosity that FHW can continue its mission.