

BRIEST

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has made such progress that the hospital has reduced his therapy sessions from the original three times a week to the current twice a week.

He is also working with a job coach through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Jenny said.

"On the occupational therapy side, Corey has gained some vision in the right eye and has more and more vision where the nerves weren't stretched," she said. "On the physical therapy

side, he is being fitted with a service dog that will arrive in June."

Receiving a dog signals a major victory, Jenny said. "We looked at getting a dog two years ago, but they didn't like Corey's traumatic brain injuries and blindness," she said. "They decided to do it this time. They will bring the dog to us and train him in the house, which is really beneficial."

The dog won't arrive until June, but the Briests have already met the new family member.

"We went to Minnesota to get paired up with the dog. He's a black Lab provided through 'Can-Do Canines,' and it has

been a process," she said. "We met the dog at Easter. His name is Baker — and he likes to eat buffalo."

Yankton dog trainer Bill Sohl will work with Corey and help him adjust to the dog, Jenny said.

"Other classes would require Corey to be away for three to four weeks. It's hard to think of him being away for that long," Jenny said. "Here, it's beneficial that he can stay here and learn how he uses the dog around the house."

Corey received an eye exam at a low-vision clinic, where the doctor found the "sweet spot" with better vision in Corey's one eye. The eye doctor is now work-

ing with Corey's therapist.

Corey also tries to remain active, attending their children's activities and visiting with buddies at Charlie Battery and the Yankton EMS station where he formerly worked.

Besides caring for her husband, Jenny is carrying the cause for other military families through the "Wounded Warrior" project.

"I used to go with the flow. Now, I speak up when something is wrong," she said. "I went to Washington, D.C., and lobbied for a veterans and caregivers' bill that just passed through Congress. It provides health insurance and a stipend for caregivers."

The bill passed the Senate, then the House and now goes back to the Senate, she said.

Jenny is also seeking respite care that provides relief for the families and caregivers of disabled soldiers.

During her travels to Washington, Jenny has met with the South Dakota congressional delegation and the staff of First Lady Michelle Obama.

Jenny has also remained in touch with ABC News reporter Bob Woodruff and his wife, Lee. Bob Woodruff suffered traumatic brain injuries while covering the war in Iraq, sharing many of the same experiences as Corey Briest. And the Briests met Lee when she was the featured

speaker at the Goodwill Industries banquet in Sioux City, Iowa.

"I have been to New York twice and met with Bob and Lee Woodruff. They are part of the 'Stand Up For Heroes' program," Jenny said. "We have a friendship and exchange e-mails. It brightens my day."

Briest family friend Pauline Rhoades of Yankton said she has seen changes in the couple, particularly Jenny, who has emerged from her former quieter nature.

"Jenny is a strong woman and a different person than I used to know. But she had to become different," Rhoades said. "Corey is my hero, and so is Jenny."

HOUSE

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because people know it is the right thing to do for our military people who put their lives on the line for us," Zikmund said. "We are now in process of doing an addition and making a home (handicapped) accessible in Rapid City."

Besides Yankton and Rapid City, the South Dakota AGC has worked with projects in Elkton and Luverne, Minn. The state chapter sponsors the "Operation Opening Doors" to help military families.

"A lot of companies and individuals have worked together in all of the projects we have done," Zikmund said. "It shows you that our people in South Dakota and other states really care."

With the AGC of America endorsement, more homes are under construction across the nation, Zikmund said.

"There is a lot of need for our military people across the country, and the national AGC has taken a lead role to offer the program," he said. "I have already helped other state chapters with information on our program and how to get one started."

Homes built in other parts of the nation will hopefully receive the same level of private donations that poured into the Briest home, Zikmund said.

"It is our hope that both the State of South Dakota and National AGC will see not only people in that community work together in the Operation Opening Doors program, but companies and corporations come forward and help support," he said.

"South Dakota has been blessed with the support and sponsorships we have had for the program."

Jenny Briest said the new home was a necessity, not an option. The Briests quickly learned they could never have remained in their old house.

"We arrived home (from California) in July 2007 but didn't get into the new home until November 2007," she said. "It was good to stay a while in the old house, because it gave us a sense

of closure. But it also showed us how impossible it would be for Corey to live there. We had problems with the shower, his wheelchair and even the front steps."

Now, 3 1/2 years later, Jenny said she still finds it difficult to realize how wonderful the new home has become.

"I took part in those phone conferences (held by the local organizers) while I was in California, and I came back to Yankton twice and picked out everything," she said. "But it was still hard to realize you were home until you saw the actual lot and house."

The Briest home has drawn national media attention. The project has also drawn the support of the South Dakota congressional delegation — U.S. Sens. Tim Johnson and John Thune and U.S. Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin.

"We're lucky that South Dakota has such good representatives that listen to us," Jenny said.

Johnson and Herseth Sandlin have visited the Briest home. Johnson holds a special personal interest in the accessibility features as he continues his recovery from a December 2006 brain hemorrhage.

Corey indicated he was proud to host Johnson and his wife, Barb.

"It was awesome. I felt honored," Corey said, flashing a grin and "thumbs-up" sign.

LEARNING LESSONS

The Briest home brought many lessons along the way, said fundraising organizer Pauline Rhoades. Those lessons are crucial for others undertaking similar projects across the country, she said.

Rhoades emphasized from the outset that the Briests never sought the home or assistance. The project grew from a groundswell of community support, she said.

Rhoades, who has organized a number of Yankton events and projects, knew she wanted to be part of the Briest home as a friend and community member.

"For me, it wasn't a matter of how do you say no, but how could you not say yes?" she said. "The project got great press and was so media-driven. Every time the Press & Dakotan ran a story, money poured in. It was probably the easiest fundraising project that I have ever worked on. It was totally overwhelming."

But therein was the concern, Rhoades said.

"We were trying to raise \$250,000 to \$300,000. Checks were coming in from all over the country," she said. "We wanted to make sure the fundraisers (sponsored by other parties) were done for the right reasons."

The Briest home received a huge boost with \$25,000 seed money from the Sioux Falls

Skyforce and team owner Mike Heineman, Rhoades said.

The team donated the money through its "Sky's The Limit" campaign and provided the use of its 501(c)(3) corporation, she said. Charlie Gross, a member of the local organizing committee, set up an account at First Dakota National Bank in Yankton.

"The Skyforce and Les Cummings (an AGC associate member) started Operation Opening Doors after we started Operations Cares, which helped soldiers' families with everyday needs such as car repairs, home repairs and food," Heineman said.

"We saw how great that need was, and we knew some soldiers may need some additional help when they came home. That's where Operation Opening Doors was created. We asked the AGC to be a part of our group and they have done a great job with it."

The Skyforce has turned Operation Opening Doors over to the AGC because it has become too large for the team to handle, Heineman said. However, he is pleased to hear the Briest home has served as a model for the entire nation.

"It is very exciting to hear that more and more communities are picking up on the idea and helping our country's soldiers," he said.

GOING NATIONAL

Cummings said he sees himself as the "cheerleader" for the operation. Now that the Briest project has gone national, he looks for even greater interest among AGC members.

However, the fundraising and construction require tremendous local support, Cummings said. A number of contractors and subcontractors donated their time, money, labor and materials for the Briest home, he said.

Cummings will continue contributing despite the recession. "In South Dakota, it's a benevolent state and people are willing to give," he said. "They are proud to stand a little bit taller and say how proud we are to support the men and women who serve our country."

Cummings sees a continuing need for the accessible homes as more injured soldiers return from battle. The Yankton project has gained further national attention with an AGC compact disc featuring the home and the Briests, Rhoades, Gross and project manager Harvard Schulz.

"I just think it's such a wonderful good-news story, what these folks have in Yankton," Cummings said. "Everyone in the community wants to be part of it. I just think Yankton, South Dakota, walks on water. God bless them."

Contributions for the Briest home have come in all forms, Rhoades said. Some carry special meaning to the donor, such as Mel Alexander of Gretna, Neb., who donated the geothermal system in honor of his own son who had just lost his life while serving with the Marines in Iraq.

"We gave back the original \$25,000 that started the campaign," Rhoades said. "We had someone who recently wanted to donate \$8,000, but we had to tell them we have no longer have a need for the money."

Charlie Battery and other SDNG members have contributed to the Briest home, and the Yankton area in turn shares a bond with the National Guard, Rhoades said.

"Yankton is unique. They have always loved Charlie Battery," she said. "This (project) definitely drew the community closer to Charlie Battery even more."

People around the United States remain in awe of the house, Jenny Briest said. "I am so proud of Yankton and to see this now go national," she said. "Nobody (in other parts of the nation) believes how much the community came together. People said, 'My community would never do this.'"

Jenny Briest said the reality of the home still hasn't fully hit her. "In time, it will sink in that this is a huge gift that has been given to us," she said. "We can never thank Yankton enough."

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