

Producing Patriots for 80 Years



The VFW National Home for Children has been part of the organization since the Roaring '20s. Through six wars, many of its residents have been inspired to serve in uniform.
by Julie Carter

Since opening the doors in 1925, the face of the VFW National Home for Children has changed, but its mission has not. It has provided the relatives of veterans with a new place to call home and an opportunity to start a new life.

The Home also has been a source of inspiration to many of its residents. A substantial number have joined the armed forces. Young men and women who have matured under VFW's watch have gone on to serve in every major conflict from WWII through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Residents here have a real sense of who and what allows them to be here," said Barry Walter, public relations director for the Home. "They all have a direct relationship with someone who served. This gives them a real sense of personal value and ownership."

Families of the Home fill its 36 individual houses on a 629-acre campus near Eaton Rapids, Mich. Each house is sponsored by a VFW Department, which pays for general maintenance. Some of the houses have single families living in them, while others have up to six children and one or two licensed child care providers.

The Home hosts frequent visits from VFW and Ladies Auxiliary members. These visitors put a face on those who make the Home a reality and instill a sense of patriotism.

"Such visits show residents that they have a support system," Walters said.

In addition to interacting with veteran-visitors, National Home occupants also are actively involved in community service. According to Walter, the children volunteer with VFW Posts and organize Veterans and Memorial Day programs. These programs feature veterans who share their experiences.

The patriotic emphasis of the Home obviously produces civic-minded adolescents. During WWII, 114 former Home residents served; 59 served during the Korean War; 34 served in the Vietnam era; and five in the Persian Gulf War. Some are serving today.

Four Home alumni who served paid the ultimate price—three (Larry Sims, Maurice Chadwick and Anthony Walter) were killed in WWII and one (Elgie Hanna) in Vietnam. Trees have been planted in their honor on the Home's campus.

On the Home's 80th anniversary, a few of its finest recalled their time there

and how it has inspired them throughout their lives.

'We All Have a Common Bond'

Jack and George Haley arrived at the Home in 1952. Jack believed all of the children there at the time were like family. "We leaned on each other and stuck up for each other," Jack once related.

Peter "Marty" Windsor, who arrived in 1986, has a similar belief about the children at the Home. Windsor, who was 15 years old, came to his house alone and lived in the Indiana 2 cottage with other children close to his age.

"I was young and scared at first," Windsor said. "I didn't know what to expect. But I went on a canoe trip with some of the other kids the first week I was there. That really brought us all together."

Matthew Lightner came to the Home a year later with his 10 siblings. His father, a Vietnam veteran, could no longer care for them and did not want to risk separating the children in foster care. Two vans picked up the kids and drove them off to their new home.

It was evident right away that this would be different from what 14-year-



Jack and George Haley

Top: Jack, at 10-years-old, and George Haley, at 9-years-old, are pictured inside the Minnesota house. The brothers lived at the Home from 1952 to 1966.

Right: George Haley served with the 26th Marines in Vietnam. He was wounded at Khe Sanh in 1968. Jack also served with the Marines in Vietnam.



COURTESY VFW NATIONAL HOME FOR CHILDREN



Matthew Lightner

Top: Matt Lightner along with his brother, Ryan, handle a firehose during a fire-fighting exercise. Lightner lived at the Home with his 10 siblings from 1987 to 1991.

Right: Lightner returned to the Home for a visit in September 2003. He met with many of the Home's residents and served as the subject in a fund-raising effort.



COURTESY VFW NATIONAL HOME FOR CHILDREN

“When the vets came to visit us at the Home, they made me proud. I was proud to live there and of my dad.”

— Marty Windsor

Peter “Marty” Windsor

Marty Windsor attended Eaton Rapids High School while he lived at the Home from 1986 to 1989. Windsor eventually joined the Marine Corps and served in the Persian Gulf War and Somalia. He currently works as a firefighter and EMT in Daggett, Mich.



COURTESY VFW NATIONAL HOME FOR CHILDREN

National Home at a Glance

Safe Haven: The National Home is a VFW-supported sanctuary for children and families.

Facilities: 36 cottages supported by 29 Departments, VFW Post 1772 in Rochester, N.H., Military Order of the Cootie (MOC) Pup Tent 5 in Marietta, Ga., and MOC Pup Tent 9 in Scottsville, Ky. The grounds also include a museum, administration building, community center, health and education building, nursery, chapel and guest lodge. The Ladies Auxiliary sponsors the maintenance for several of these buildings.

Setting: Eaton Rapids, Mich., 20 miles south of Lansing, the state capital.

Origins: Created Jan. 7, 1925. The first family moved in March 9, 1925.

Mission: To provide families of veterans with opportunities to grow and develop in a supportive community.

Current Residents: 70 children and 27 parents. The Home's peak residency was in 1964, with 207 children.

Funding Sources:

- Estates and bequests, 23%
- Individual donations, 19%
- VFW and MOC organizations, 18%
- Ladies Auxiliary and MOCA, 11%
- Increases in investment value, 9%
- Investment income, 7%
- Miscellaneous revenues, 3%

Financial Allocations:

- Program services, 69%
- General/administrative services, 22%
- Fund raising, 9%

Visiting the Home

Staff members guide general tours of the campus, as well as providing tours of specific houses and facilities.

If you are interested in visiting the Home, please contact the Public Relations Department. For the residents' safety, all visitors are asked to sign in at the Visitor's Desk in the Administration Building. Contact:

VFW National Home for Children
3573 S. Waverly Road
Eaton Rapids, MI 48827
Tel.: 1-800-424-8360
Web site: www.vfwnationalhome.org

old Lightner was used to.

"The first day we were there, some of the kids invited us to play football with them," Lightner said. "We all really liked football, and we were happy to be included so quickly."

The Lightner children were temporarily placed in the Wisconsin cottage. But state child care rules regulate the number of children that can be in one house; therefore, the younger children were soon sent to live in the New York 2 house.

"I was a rule-breaker at that age," Lightner said. "And the Home had a lot of rules I had to get used to."

In his time there from 1987 to June 1991, he did get used to the rules, and he came to appreciate what the Home stood for. He saw how the National Home differed from the nearest town, Eaton Rapids, and knew he was surrounded by something special.

"It became real obvious that there was a sense of community," Lightner said. "We all have a common bond. It was a big family."

Lightner felt that closeness not just with the residents, but with the staff as well. They were there to help the children grow into responsible adults. That entailed disciplining when necessary.

"There were times when I rebelled and was set straight by an employee," Lightner said. "But I needed it. It's more than just a job for the staff there—they genuinely care for everyone."

Both Lightner and Windsor remembered raising the American flag outside their houses each morning when they were residents. Windsor didn't think much of it at the time, but now realizes how important that was.

"I respect that the Home did that [honored the flag]," Windsor said. "It was just thought of as a chore at the time, but now I know better."

Life After the Home

Both Jack and George Haley served with the Marines in Vietnam. George, who fought with the 26th Marines, was wounded at Khe Sanh in 1968. He received three Purple Hearts during his tour. Jack was in Da Nang with the 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division.

Windsor joined the Marines a year

after he left the Home in 1989. He always knew he wanted to be a Marine, like his father. His time at the Home helped solidify that decision.

"When the vets came to visit us at the Home, they made me proud," he said. "I was proud to live there and of my dad."

Windsor was in the Corps for eight years and served in the Persian Gulf War in 1991. He currently lives in Daggett, Mich., with his wife and two sons. He also followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a firefighter. He has worked as an EMT as well since 1997. He said there is not a day that goes by that he does not think about his friends from the Home.

Lightner first joined the Army Reserve in 1992 after one year of college. He felt it was the proper place for him at that stage in his life. "I wanted to do my duty," he said.

Two years later, he joined the Marine Corps, remaining on active duty until June 1999. He was transferred to the Marine Corp Reserve while attending college full time. He was activated in January 2003 as part of the 2nd Transportation Support Battalion out of Camp Lejeune, N.C. Currently he is working in an administrative position at Camp Lejeune while awaiting possible deployment to Iraq.

Changing with the Times

In 2004, the VFW National Home for Children expanded its eligibility requirements to further assist the families of veterans. Now, the Home allows children and spouses of active-duty troops to move in. These families can take advantage of the new beginning the Home offers regardless of current VFW membership or eligibility. The Home is currently working with the U.S. Army to spread the news to the military.

"We saw that the need was there for these families," Walter said. "We had to change to fill that void."

Adapting to the realities of the 21st century has paid off. The Home currently has more referrals than ever before. Undoubtedly, the new guidelines will help the Home raise more patriotic citizens over the next 80 years. ☪

E-mail jcarter@vfw.org