

# Ceremony marks grand opening for Golden Isles Veterans Village

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On an overcast Saturday morning, a dream officially became reality with a ceremony to officially open the Golden Isles Veterans Village.

The ribbon cutting marked years of work from the village's board of directors and volunteers, to local rotaries and even elected officials.

Located at the corner of G Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, the village has 29 tiny homes, a laundry room and a community center. Each house is 8 feet by 16 feet and includes an under-the-counter refrigerator, a day bed, a microwave, built-in storage, a full bath with shower, a ceiling fan and a deck.

The village will serve as transitional housing for homeless veterans and includes essential services such as physical and mental health care, education and job training to help veterans get their lives back on track.

"This is the beginning," Lorene Reid, president of Golden Isles Veterans Village's Board of Directors. "The housing first then the program next. We're going to give a hand up and services to veterans who deserve at least that. They deserve our support in order to enable them to get back into society, and that's exactly what we're going to do."

The Rev. Kendall Shaw, pastor at Empowerment City Church and a veteran, opened the ceremony with a prayer that the village would become "a place of hope and healing" for veterans in need.

“We thank you for their unwavering courage, their selfless sacrifices and their commitment to defending our freedom,” Shaw prayed. “Lord, we ask for your blessing on this village, that it may become a sanctuary of peace and comfort, a place where veterans can come and find solace and healing, both physically and emotionally.”

After Shaw’s prayer and the presentation of colors by the Brunswick High Navy JROTC, Reid gave a history on the years-long struggle to build the village.

“I don’t know if any of you have ever constructed a home and know what that’s like, but do that times 31, add a little bit of challenge along the way and it was definitely a process,” Reid said. “We are eternally grateful to each and every one of you for your part in helping us get to here. We have absolutely no way of being able to do this alone. It was a community project.”

The vision for the project came from Starling Sutton, a native of Brunswick and a veteran. Sutton had been homeless as a teenager, and he wanted to do something to help veterans in need, Reid said.

Sutton started by going to the local Rotary clubs and enlisting their help to get the project off the ground. Sutton wouldn’t see his dream completed in his lifetime. He died before its completion.

To honor Sutton for his vision in getting the project going, Reid presented Sutton’s widow with a visionary award. The award was a prism, which was used to illuminate the below deck areas on wooden ships.

“It’s for someone who’s actually had the dream, tenacity and passion to bring forward something people actually want to be involved in,” Reid said. “That was Starling.”

Turning Sutton’s vision into reality would take a lot of hard work. Reid said Nine Line Foundation — a charitable organization dedicated to meeting the financial and specialized needs of severely injured soldiers and their families — was the village’s first partner.

Nine Line President Megan Hostler would join the board early on, and she arranged for the exterior components of the housing and community center to be built by students learning geometry through construction in Illinois, Reid said.

Another key partner was South Newport Baptist Church in Townsend. The mission team at the church, led by Henderson Hope, did a lot of the construction in places where people were in need, including the Caribbean.

Hope wanted to help with the village and asked if his group could help build the tiny homes. The decision was a no-brainer for the board, Reid said, but they didn’t have the property for the homes yet.

Hope had the components sent to the church, where volunteers could begin constructing the homes.

“It got all of the energy going,” Reid said. “It got everyone involved, and it let people know that this was really going to happen.”

Reid also highlighted VFW Post 4092 on St. Simons Island and American Legion Post 137 in Darien for their work on the project.