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New home keeps vets' families close

By Suzanne Bohan, STAFF WRITER

PALO ALTO — Tonia Sargent used to dread leaving her severely wounded husband's hospital bedside to return to an empty hotel room.

"Silence is scary sitting alone in a hotel," said Tonia, mother of two teenage girls. "Sometimes you're afraid of your own thoughts."

Master Sgt. Kenneth Sargent, a Marine serving in Iraq, barely survived a bullet tearing into the right side of his head and out the left, taking with it about two inches of brain tissue. A deep scar arcs over the left side of his shaved head. Though he speaks cogently, Kenneth, 37, who has served 19 years in the Marines, moves slowly and faces years of grueling rehabilitation. He is also partially blind in one eye.

With the official opening Wednesday of the Fisher House at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Tonia at least no longer fears isolation. Nor does she add to her worries the cost of paying for lodging — which averages \$110 a night in this area — while she stays near her husband.

The 16,000-square-foot house, which at no charge houses 21 families of veterans undergoing rehabilitation at the Palo Alto VA Hospital, now gives her a place to call home. She is also forming bonds with people coping with a trauma that only those with severely wounded spouses or kin can understand.

"These houses are humane houses," Tonia said. "I can start the day with other people who will know how the day will unfold."



WOUNDED VETERAN Frank Sandoval stands for the Pledge of Allegiance at the opening dedication for the first Fisher House on the West Coast on Wednesday in Palo Alto. (MATHEW SUMNER Staff)

An estimated 800 people gathered under sunny skies for the late-morning opening of the two-story, colonial-style building.

Inside are 21 suites, along with a large dining room, an elegant living room with comfortable, beige sofas, a well-appointed

kitchen with an adjoining family room and a backyard with a new lawn. The Palo Alto Fisher House is the 33rd in the United States, in addition to one in Germany. All are located at military medical centers and VA hospitals.



Marine Master Sgt. Kenneth Sargent with his wife, Tonia, (left) and daughter, Tasha, 18 (MATHEW SUMNER Staff)

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs can use its funding only to care for vets; it cannot spend funds on non-veterans, such as for hotel rooms. Yet families, like the Sargents, often struggle to afford the cost of lodging.

Still, family support is considered crucial in the recovery of these servicemen and women. About 60 percent of combatants from the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts are returning home with traumatic brain injuries, caused by improvised explosive devices, blasts and land mines. Their rehabilitation takes months or years.

The Palo Alto VA is one of four Veterans Affairs medical centers with a traumatic brain-injury unit, and veterans arrive from throughout the West to receive care.

"Doctors tell us one of the keys to patient care is time spent with friends and family, especially family," said Gordon Mansfield, deputy secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, who was one of several speakers at the ceremony. Mansfield sustained a severe spinal chord injury in Vietnam.

Other speakers included Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Atherton; Kenneth Fisher, chairman of the Fisher House Foundation, which spearheads construction of the houses; and Michael Fister, president of Cadence Design Systems, which raised \$1 million for the Palo Alto house.

Almost \$2.5 million for the project was raised through donations from individuals and organizations, a sum matched by the foundation. In 2004, VA nurse Karen Blair gave

the first donation — a \$5,000 check. A woman from a local chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution said her group gave several thousand dollars.

"You mailed in not only your checks, but your hearts as well," praised Eshoo.

Tonia moved into Fisher House this week, and her daughters with her. Her husband can now get a day pass and simply cross the street to visit. That casual time with Kenneth makes a vast difference, she said. He can also get back to his old self, joking with military buddies outside of hospital walls.

Kenneth, who said he has felt better since his family has been close by, was laughing with another Marine on Wednesday.

"They're able to talk about their injuries, talk about their (military) duty," Tonia said. "They have these little healing conversations."

For her, the house provides a center in the midst of what she describes as chaos. For 19 years, she said, she has been a military wife. Now, with her husband severely disabled for years to come, if not permanently, she is adapting to an entirely new life.

"I need support and structure," she said. "Any opportunity to make a normal life, we'll take it."



Marine Master Sgt. Kenneth Sargent meets Jean Berglund, who served in WWII with WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services), at the opening dedication for the first Fisher House on the West Coast on Wednesday in Palo Alto. Fisher House is a facility for veterans and their families to stay while they recover from their wounds. (MATHEW SUMNER - STAFF)