

# Crescent City Veterans Community is a ‘Great Support System’

**VFW members of Post 8973 in New Orleans helped build, and now serve as leaders of a community designed for returning service members with rehabilitative needs**

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Tucked away in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans lives a group of recovering veterans who help each other. That is the idea behind Bastion, a community of wounded and injured veterans.

The Bastion Community of Resilience, founded by Executive Director Dylan Tete, is designed for veterans, who have life-long rehabilitative needs, and their families. Tete, a member of VFW Post 8973, is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y. He who served in Iraq from 2003-04 with 3rd Bde., 2nd Inf.



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“We are a community intervention,” Tete said. “And we are very much focused on strengthening resilience for warriors who are exiting post-acute care and need a village.”

Bastion currently has 19 residential buildings, or 38 units total. They include homes for nine nonveteran volunteers, who, “help on a day-to-day basis,” according to James Reiss, a member of Bastion’s advisory council.

Reiss served in the Marine Corps from 1995-2005 as an AH-1W Super Cobra pilot. As a part of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), he deployed to the Middle East in 2000 with the Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA) 367 aboard the USS Tarawa. He also deployed to Afghanistan in 2004 with HMLA-773.

Reiss said the goal at Bastion is mainly to provide housing and care for veterans who have received service-connected traumatic brain injuries (TBIs).

### **‘A Family Environment’**

At the community’s wellness center, Bastion provides programs and classes — such as yoga, art therapy and chair massage therapy — not only for residents of Bastion, but for veterans of New Orleans. Reiss said the community also has partnerships with several clinical providers that offer on-site service to residents.

Jeremy Brewer, a social worker for Bastion, said many of the community’s current residents have mild-to-moderate TBIs.

From 2001-2005, Brewer served as a Marine Corps infantryman. He deployed to Iraq in 2003 with the 2nd Fleet Anti-terrorism Security Team Company and returned in 2005 as part of the 15th MEU aboard the USS Bonhomme Richard, with Charlie Co., 1st Bn., 1st Marines.

“Almost all veteran residents have service-related issues,” Brewer said. “At least 60 percent

of the residents at Bastion have a service-connected case of PTSD.”

This includes Bastion’s first resident, Rick Hall, who said he suffers from back problems stemming from his time in the Army, as well as PTSD, anxiety and depression. Hall said he receives medical treatment from the VA, and living at Bastion helps because he is around “people who understand” what he is going through.

“Living here has really helped me to grow as a person,” Hall said.

In 1999, Hall enlisted in the Army and ended his active-duty service in 2003. Hall then joined the Army National Guard, and in 2008, while in Iraq, was deployed with the 220th Military Police Company. He left the National Guard in February 2009. Hall said Bastion reminds him of being a part of the “brotherhood” of the military.

“You can get help from your neighbors if you need something,” Hall said. “I see it as a place where veterans and their families can live with a great support system and stabilize themselves in a community that helps them.”

Hall said he first heard about Bastion in 2015 after moving from New York City to New Orleans. Hall, along with his dog, Spike, moved into a Bastion unit in January of this year. Bastion’s best qualities, according to Hall, are its “support system” and “culture.”

“It’s not only a place where you are getting help, it’s also a place where you are getting support from other veterans and residents,” Hall said.

Tete said all residents of Bastion are mandated to commit six hours per week of community service, adding that it is also one of the reasons for having nonveteran households.

To help normalize the community for the veterans, Tete said, Bastion “is a family environment” and that of all its residents — about 80 people — half are children.

“We built as many three-bedroom units as one-bedroom units because we wanted families

with children in the community,” Tete said. “We wanted to normalize the community for the veterans’ transition into civilian society.”

### **A \$17 Million Community**

Bastion’s first phase was completed in January, and Tete said the veteran residents currently at Bastion “have a history of mild or moderate TBIs.”

“Their challenges are more related to post traumatic stress, depression and suicide ideation,” Tete said. “Part of that is because [New Orleans] has not had an inpatient [VA] hospital or polytrauma unit for the last 12 years.”

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and destroyed the city’s VA hospital. A new hospital opened in November 2016 but is not expected to “fully open” until the end of this year, according to The New Orleans Advocate.

“We want to be a part of the post-Katrina effort here in New Orleans,” Brewer said. “We want to be a part of the city’s post-traumatic growth.”

Reiss said the second phase of the project is expected to at least double the residential units and expand its care and services to veterans with “severe TBIs.”

“As we grow into being able to treat those neuro and physiological wounds, then we can really get to have a higher level of [TBI] patient here at Bastion,” Reiss said.

The total cost for the completed community is expected to be about \$17 million, Reiss said.

### **VFW-Connected Effort**

Brewer said there were several fundraising events held before the community's inception to raise money for Bastion.

"There was a lot of support from the VFW, especially in the beginning," Brewer said.

Reiss said Post 8973 is the "linchpin" for all of the elements that made the creation of Bastion possible.

"[Post 8973] can tie in all the things in the city that are veteran related, and VFW acts as a central hub for all the spokes to attach to," Reiss said. "Bastion is a perfect example of something that VFW accomplishes by having a large and involved membership.

"While Bastion and VFW aren't officially linked, we wouldn't have Bastion if it weren't for VFW and having that community VFW provides," Reiss added.

According to Reiss, Post 8973 is "predominantly" comprised of post-9/11 veterans. In total, the Post has 317 members, of which Reiss says some 80 percent are Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.

"The local VFW has been a life ring for a lot of returning veterans," Tete said. "The post-Katrina landscape was abysmal. All of New Orleans' veteran infrastructure was completely wiped away, and VFW was there for veterans who needed support."

Photo caption: Bastion Community of Resilience board member James Reiss; Executive Director Dylan Tete; social worker Jeremy Brewer; and first resident Rick Hall, stand in the community's courtyard in New Orleans. Bastion's homes are designed to promote engagement with neighbors to strengthen resilience among veterans in the community.

*This article is featured in the October 2017 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), editorial associate, VFW magazine. Photo by Tom Pumphret.*