

Making a Difference

On a Mission

A retired Army officer establishes an organization to end veterans' homelessness.

► **DEBORAH SNYDER SHOWS** little fatigue as she cheerfully greets volunteers at the Ritz-Carlton in Arlington, Va., on this windy morning. Last night she flew in from a celebrity golf fundraiser in Florida to oversee this rehearsal for a fashion show, the first she has ever organized. Snyder appears energized by the golf tourney, which raked in more than \$30,000 for her cause. She hopes the fashion show, also a fundraiser, will add to that sum.

It's all part of the whirlwind schedule she keeps as CEO of Operation Renewed Hope Foundation, the nonprofit she established to end homelessness among American veterans. Naturally Snyder has empathy for past and present military personnel: For almost 22 years, she piloted Huey and Black Hawk helicopters for the Army, including tours in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm. "I enjoyed the camaraderie, the excitement," says Snyder, whose background reveals itself in her military bearing and assertive voice.

But as Snyder neared retirement from active duty as a lieutenant colonel in 2009 at age 43, she was looking for a new mission. She and her husband bought a house near their home in Alexandria, Va., to shelter people in need, which led her to research the number of homeless veterans in the U.S. According to

federal estimates, more than 75,000 veterans were living on the street or in transitional shelters at that time. "It was astounding to me," Snyder recalls. She is incredulous that they could end up on the streets despite "putting their lives on the line for their country."

The causes of veteran homelessness are hard to pinpoint. "I've talked to at least 500 veterans, and I could give you 500 different reasons why they've fallen on hard times, whether it be divorce or medical problems or a death in the family," she says. What's clear is that returning veterans are often quickly forgotten by society. "I liken it to stepping into the abyss. You don't have the support system you have when you're on active duty."

To provide that support, Snyder looked into starting a nonprofit—something she knew little about. Countless hours of Internet research tutored her on applying for 501(c)(3) status, an arduous process involving mountains of paperwork and unfamiliar tasks such as creating a board of advisers. The steps prepared her to be an effective CEO. "I can have a better understanding of what I'm asking other people to do," Snyder says.

She launched Operation Renewed Hope Foundation in 2011. Unlike transitional shelters, the organization focuses on getting veterans into their own homes before adding other support services. It's an approach to homelessness called "Housing First" that was pioneered in New York in the '90s. Once they have stable housing, Snyder says veterans can take charge of other areas of their lives—"free their minds up to get that job to be self-sustaining." The approach is working: Snyder reports that 80 to 85 percent of the foundation's clients have stayed in their homes.

Christopher, a 39-year-old veteran with a quick smile, agrees. In 2013 he was

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staying in a homeless shelter apart from his wife and three daughters when he connected with Operation Renewed Hope. He credits the organization's free financial counseling

with helping his family buy a three-bedroom house in Woodbridge, Va., in 2014. Snyder also got him a job as a driver for a junk collection business, his first steady work in months. "She really went out on a limb for me and got my family back together," Christopher says. This year he plans to start his own business.

In about three years, Operation Renewed Hope grew from an all-volunteer team of friends and family to six paid employees, including one formerly homeless veteran and Snyder's husband, a retired Air Force pilot who manages the foundation's grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Snyder works as a volunteer because of her other full-time job, a civilian position with the Pentagon that she took shortly after retiring from the Army. Her day job leaves her evenings, lunch breaks and weekends to work for her nonprofit and help raise her 7- and 9-year-old children.

Despite a hectic schedule, Snyder says her situation doesn't come close to what her clients go through. "Can you imagine the stress if you have three kids and you don't have a place to sleep?" she asks. "Every time I think I have too much to juggle, I think about the family who is living in their vehicle. And I think, *Shame on you for even thinking you have too much to do.*"

She draws parallels between housing veterans today and her past experience as a commander of 250 soldiers. "You are in charge of everything about their lives—their morale, their well-being."



Deborah Snyder welcomes a veteran to his new home.

By December of last year, Operation Renewed Hope had assisted more than 300 veterans (nearly 100 of them during 2014), disbursing interest-free loans totaling

\$100,000, plus tens of thousands more in donated cars and furniture. Golf tournaments, galas and other fundraisers have raised \$300,000 to support these initiatives and others, such as the foundation's efforts to buy and renovate homes for veterans to live in.

Volunteers are always needed for the fundraisers. Christopher is one this day, taking direction from a choreographer while he strides across the Ritz-Carlton ballroom. At Snyder's invitation, he has agreed to walk the runway in the benefit fashion show. But he hopes to do more: If his new business is successful, Christopher plans to buy a house for homeless veterans. "How could I not give back?" he asks. Snyder says many formerly homeless veterans feel the same way and pay it forward with her nonprofit.

The organization is getting noticed by others, too, receiving awards from the Newman's Own Foundation and the Freddie Mac Foundation. More recently, L'Oréal Paris honored Snyder as one of its 10 "Women of Worth" in 2014, although she downplays the attention. "Hundreds of organizations across the nation are working as hard as we are," Snyder says before shutting off to consult with choreographers, models and performers.

Next on her schedule was a comedy fundraiser. And in between, endless phone calls and visits with veterans who need help with anything from housing to transportation. "We're where the rubber meets the road, and we're making it happen," Snyder says. **S**