

Wounded veterans' homes also get some help

El Cajon man seriously hurt fighting in Iraq is fifth beneficiary of free renovation program

By [Nathan Max \(/staff/nathan-max/\)](#) 11:01 a.m. Dec. 17, 2012



[\(/photos/2012/dec/17/749171/\)](#)

Despite bad weather, workers affiliated with the Healing our Heroes' Homes program have been working throughout the weekend to renovate the house of retired U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Travis Henschel, a Purple Heart recipient who was wounded in Iraq in 2009. — *Eduardo Contreras*

EL CAJON — Purple Heart recipient Travis Henschel has a container full of shrapnel and a helmet with a gaping hole in it to remind him of his time in Iraq.

More than three years ago, Henschel, 36, suffered a laundry list of injuries to his head and body when the vehicle he was traveling in was hit by an explosive. Amazingly, the El Cajon resident returned to work in April as a full-time plumber, and this weekend he's getting rewarded for his heroism with \$30,000 worth of renovations to his house.

Henschel is the fifth wounded veteran to take advantage of the relatively new Healing our Heroes' Homes program, launched by [San Diego-based Embrace \(<http://www.embrace1.org/H3>\)](#). The program, nicknamed H3, is designed to connect student volunteers and other charitable-minded community members with injured veterans to provide badly needed renovations to their homes.

In Henschel's case, workers were braving this weekend's rainy weather to install everything from concrete in the backyard to energy-efficient windows and a synthetic turf front lawn. Volunteers will also be painting the exterior of the house, renovating two bathrooms and customizing the shower for Henschel, who has special needs because of his traumatic brain injury.

The Grainger Foundation is the title sponsor of the renovation and donated the money. Alliance Residential Building is overseeing the project, and college students from San Diego State University have volunteered to do some of the work.

The project was originally scheduled to last from Thursday to today, but rainy weather set the work back a couple of days, Embrace founder Sean Sheppard said.

"Even if it was just the front lawn or the bathroom, it's amazing," said Sandy Henschel, 36, Travis' wife of 10 years. "They're doing an immense amount of work in just a few days. It would have taken years to get this done.

"Getting this work done so my husband doesn't reinjure himself more trying to do it, or hit his head on the bathroom door, it's little things like that which will have a big impact on getting rid of the everyday frustration that he has."

Henschel, who medically retired as a staff sergeant last year, served in the Army from 1994 to 2002 before re-enlisting in 2008. After being deployed to Iraq, he was injured in June 2009.

Henschel, the father of a 15-year-old son and a 9-year-old daughter, suffered multiple shrapnel wounds, a serious head injury, lost the index finger on his left hand, has nerve damage in his right hand and lost two weeks of his memory as a result of the explosion. And those are just some of his injuries.

Despite all that, he and his family were on hand to help a friend, another wounded veteran, during Embrace's fourth home restoration project. It was there that Sheppard learned of Henschel's situation.

To become eligible for the Healing our Heroes' Homes program, the candidate must be a homeowner, must have a minimum disability rating of 80 percent, must be a veteran or active-duty military and has to demonstrate a need, Sheppard said.

Henschel easily met all the criteria.

"I heard about all the things he has been through with his recovery, and the property definitely needed a face-lift," Sheppard said. "I met the family, and it just felt right."

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