



Red White & Proud

In a new series, **NEWSWEEK** honors Americans who help others be healthy and free.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO be "the best"? In honor of Independence Day, **NEWSWEEK** launched a nationwide search for people and projects that exemplify American values. Not partisan or political values, but values as they were originally framed by the Founders. We were looking for visionaries who make the life, liberty and happiness of others their priority. We found them. Everywhere. In the private sector and the public sector, in the professions and suburban kitchens. In Washington, D.C., and Mississippi—and in Wheaton, Ill., where an entire town (right) got together to build a five-bedroom house for a local man who was injured in Iraq. Wheaton is just one reason to be proud of America.



IT TAKES A VILLAGE: More than 200 people helped build the house and care for Gomez
 PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSE CHEHAK FOR NEWSWEEK



WHEATON, ILLINOIS

A town bands together to build a house for a local man, injured in war.

THE SON OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS, Joel Gomez did not take the American Dream for granted. He fought for it. After high

school at Wheaton-Warrenville South in Illinois, he joined the United States Army and later went off to serve in Iraq. In March 2004, his tank crashed in the Tigris River, and Sergeant Gomez was paralyzed from the neck down. Gomez, who will never walk again, assumed that after treatment he would go back to his little basement apartment in Wheaton, just another forgotten casualty of war.

His hometown saw it otherwise. This 24-year-old native son deserved better—and he was going to get it. Michelle Senatore, a civic volunteer in Wheaton, spearheaded a campaign to raise money to build a big house for Gomez, a place that would be state-of-the-art for the disabled. Senatore,

the daughter of a Vietnam vet who faced disdain when he came home from that war, vowed, “I’m not going to let that happen to Joel.” The house-building dream would cost \$400,000, a seemingly tall task, and require a massive amount of donated labor. “If everyone works together in just a little way,” said Senatore, “things can happen.”

The townspeople of Wheaton, a community known for its rock-ribbed patriotism and deeply religious values, jumped at the chance to help Gomez. Volunteers came from some 50 groups: firefighters and carpenters, contractors, physicians, store owners, the local VFW and the PTA, school sports teams, cheerleaders and Cub

Scouts. To raise money for a van that could accommodate a wheelchair, the group approached Dick Portillo, the owner of a chain of restaurants, and asked if he would let them hold a fund-raiser. Portillo simply wrote a check to pay for the van. “When our country needed him,” said Portillo, “he was there.” Ryan Altieri, 17, a high-school baseball player, worked at a chili-dinner fund-raiser. “There’s not much of a better cause,” he explained. Dr. Scott Kolbaba, whose son played on sports teams with Gomez, went to other physicians and asked them to provide special care during Gomez’s rehabilitation without charge. “Here’s a hometown kid who needed some help,” said Kolbaba. “The least we can do is give a little back.” Firefighters organized a wheelchair basketball game to raise money. They sometimes drop by to visit him. “It’s almost like we’ve known him forever,” said firefighter Jeff MacKay.

The house, on Washington Street in Wheaton, will be completed in a few weeks. It has five bedrooms and five bathrooms, and it is equipped with technology that will make doors open and lights switch on and off at the sound of Gomez’s voice. The soldier’s father, Algimiro Gomez, speaking through an interpreter, has tears in his eyes as he talks with appreciation about the town’s efforts. “I never thought or hoped anyone could help us the way they did,” he says.

Gomez is still a patient at Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital in Wheaton, which has waived all fees for care. If his progress continues, he might be released in several weeks. From a hospital bed, he struggled to speak without a device that aids his tracheotomy, expressing his thanks. “I don’t think I paid for anything,” he said one day last week. Senatore, who spearheaded the effort, gazed into his eyes and told him: “You paid your price, sweetheart.” And then some.

—HILARY SHENFELD
and DIRK JOHNSON

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NEW DIGS: Gomez may move into his home soon