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'A new chapter in our lives,' military vet says of free new home



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PORT ST. LUCIE – U.S. Air Force veteran Francis “Frankie” Reilly choked up Monday, remarking about the groups and individuals that came together to provide him and his family a mortgage-free home in the Heron Preserve community.



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Air Force veteran and family honored with a special gift in Port St. Lucie

Veteran Francis “Frankie” Reilly celebrates during a groundbreaking for a new home for he and his family from PulteGroup and Building Homes for Heroes

“This groundbreaking signifies more than just the building of a new home, it signifies a fresh start, a new chapter in our lives that I never anticipated,” Reilly said.

Reilly, 48, a more than two-decade veteran, was selected by homebuilder PulteGroup as part of the company’s Built to Honor program to receive the home on Southwest Sand Dollar Way.

Reilly, who arrived at the morning groundbreaking ceremony to applause, sustained a severe leg injury in 2004 after returning from a mission in Afghanistan.

Small American flags surrounded the lot, and a large American flag was suspended between palm trees.

“Today is about Frankie Reilly,” said Brent Baker, PulteGroup Southeast Florida Division President. “It’s an honor for us to be able to build this home for Frankie and his family.”

PulteGroup worked with Building Homes for Heroes, which has been involved in building, renovating or modifying more than 320 homes across the country for veterans over the last 17 years, according Rusty Smallwood, of Building Homes for Heroes.

“The significance of this gift transcends the material value of it,” Reilly said. “To say this home is a gift is an understatement. It’s a symbol and a hope of testament to the boundless goodness and compassion that exists within the human spirit.”

Mayor Shannon Martin said the city is “a hometown for heroes,” saying they are loved, honored and respected.

Reilly said he’s lived in a number of states, and thought Florida was the best in the country, particularly for veterans.



Air Force veteran Francis "Frankie" Reilly shares a hug from Kristine Cohn, of Ibis Charities, while talking with Port St. Lucie Mayor Shannon Martin (left) during groundbreaking for a mortgage-free home for Frankie and his family on Monday, May 22, 2023, in Port St. Lucie. PulteGroup will build a 4-bedroom/3-bath home on an estate lot in Heron Preserve as part of PulteGroup's Built to Honor program, in partnership with Homes for Heroes, building mortgage-free homes for veterans.
ERIC HASERT/TCPALM

“I thank God once again, I thank the citizens of Port St. Lucie, citizens of Florida, and most of all, the citizens of the United States of America,” Reilly said.

The home's base price is more than \$515,000, though Reilly's has special modifications to accommodate for his injuries that increase the cost.

Military service

Reilly said he joined the Air Force in 1994, shortly after his 19th birthday. One of five children, Reilly said he grew up in Jersey City, New Jersey, and made

some bad decisions as a youth. He finally got involved in sports, and liked the team environment.

He said as he was graduating high school he didn't have many options. His father was a Vietnam vet and in the Air Force, and Reilly followed in his father's footsteps.

"It was kind of like joining a family," Reilly said. "The military was ... like having another family."

He said in the 1990s there were a number of terrorist attacks. He said he went to Kuwait in 1996 to train, and at the time was a forward air controller. His role would be to accompany soldiers on the ground and coordinate and authorize air support if needed.

He noted the attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in June 1996 in which 19 U.S. service members died, and the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole, a naval destroyer, in Yemen in which 17 sailors died.

"You had multiple attacks, basically, the enemy trying to get our attention," Reilly said. "And we pretty much didn't pay any attention to them at all ... We didn't really address it. And then 9/11 happened."

He said he was stationed in Iceland when his wife, Heather, had their third child as 9/11 happened.

He'd switched jobs in 1999 to become a special warfare airman, an elite special operations role with the primary goal being to pick up downed pilots and others, he said.

"We did a bunch of other stuff, civilian rescue missions, rescuing the Army, Marines," he said.

He said in the service he operated in countries including Turkey, Afghanistan, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudia Arabia, Iraq, Ethiopia and Mexico.

He had 11 deployments for periods of four months, some of which were training.



Air Force veteran Francis "Frankie" Reilly (left) is greeted by neighbor and fellow veteran Mike Sharp after the groundbreaking for a new home for Reilly and his family from PulteGroup and Building Homes for Heroes on Monday, May 22, 2023, in the Heron Preserve community in Port St. Lucie. "It's the best, the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me and my family," Reilly said about this new home. "And to do a home, it isn't just for me, it's a sanctuary for my family, it's safety. Having this house gives me peace of mind to know when I pass on from this world that my family will be secure, in the country that I love, and the state that I love also." *ERIC HASERT/TCPALM*

“We didn't just deploy to wars, we would go to Haiti when the earthquake happened, Katrina, all different types of things,” he said.

He got injured in Arizona following a mission in Afghanistan in 2004.

“When I exited the aircraft, the parachute, grabbed ahold of my leg, while the parachute was opening, and ripped it, like snapped it backwards,” he said.

He went through rehab, and stayed in the military, exiting in 2018.

Life in the military and the trauma took a toll on his family life and his physical and mental health.

“I started to kind of realize that the military isn't going to be there my whole life. And at that point, I was like, I don't want to leave the service broken, like how my father was, my father had severe PTSD,” Reilly said. “I learned that lesson from him ... he just never got over the war. So I could kind of see those symptoms in myself.”

He got intensive mental health treatment, and said he “started to transition into what life is really about.”

He got involved in sports and sports as therapy. He competes in paralympic cycling.

After leaving the military he lived in Melbourne, and got connected with Building Homes for Heroes.

He filled out the paperwork last fall, and in February learned he was chosen.

“I was so emotional. I couldn't even speak,” Reilly said. “I put it up there with the comparability of the birth of my children, being present for that.”