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Chance meeting leads to change of fortune for homeless vet

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A Marine Corps veteran noticed a homeless man who turned out to be a Vietnam-era Marine veteran. The two have forged a friendship, and along the way raised money to turn his life around.

Jim Stewart didn't ask people for help.

He'd been in worse situations than living in his car. He got shot in Vietnam, bled in a ditch. Being homeless wasn't ideal, but it wasn't the worst he'd been through.

He developed a routine. He'd wake up, start his morning with a protein shake, then go to the gym as part of his dedicated fitness regimen.

But one day — the Fourth of July this year — was different. It was the day Stewart met Nicole Banks and her 11-year-old son, Rohan Ghala.

That was the day Stewart's life began to change.

A Marine Corps veteran, Banks noticed the Purple Heart license plate on Stewart's 1996 Pontiac Bonneville as it sat in a Northwest Side supermarket parking lot, its back seat filled with stuff as if someone lived in it. Then Banks saw Stewart sitting nearby in a chair in the shade.

Banks and Rohan decided to approach him. Stewart was cautious at first, but his demeanor changed when Banks thanked him for his service and told him she was a Marine.

"I'm a Marine, too," he said, flashing a smile.

Banks and Rohan stayed and talked for five hours.

"I just couldn't leave him there and not do anything to help him," Banks said.

Stewart mentioned things he needed, such as a car with a working air conditioner and a chair that reclined so he could sleep outside his old car when it got too hot. He also mentioned he needed help with an appeal he filed with the Veterans Administration.

Banks knew that she and people she knew could help with those things. She also knew she could do more.

She turned to Facebook, and in just more than a month, a fundraiser on the social media site raised \$8,681 from more than 200 donors. It also helped connect Stewart with people willing to help in other ways. Part of the money was used to buy Stewart a car, a 2007 Honda Element, for \$5,000. The rest will go toward insurance and other needs.

The people who donated came from all over. Some lived in Banks' neighborhood in Dublin. Some were colleagues, high school friends or former college professors, such as Arnon Reichers, who has taken Stewart and Banks to dinner and accompanied them on trips to car dealerships. Others who contributed were friends of friends and complete strangers.

Shortly after the Fourth of July meeting, Yee Hang, a retired Army colonel who works with Banks at the Defense Logistics Agency, picked up Stewart and took him to the VA.

Stewart has since been reapproved for a housing voucher, and Samantha Sawmiller, who works in U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown's office, helped discover that Stewart's 2014 appeal on his disability claim hadn't been reviewed properly.

That process has been restarted and accelerated. If it is approved, he'll be eligible for increased monthly compensation.

Stewart calls what has happened to him "providential."

"I can't think of another way to put it," he said. "Too many things are falling into place." Another thing that's fallen into place: Stewart being moved off the waiting list at a local apartment complex. In the coming weeks, Stewart will move from his car into the apartment.

Stewart said he hasn't spent much time thinking about what his life will be like once that

happens. It's all happened so fast.

"Every day has been day-to-day, so I haven't got there yet," he said.

It's a mindset he's developed while living in his car. When you're homeless, you can't look far into the future, he said. Your focus has to remain on the present, on how you'll survive.

Stewart learned how to survive, but it wasn't easy. He said he fell into financial trouble about six years ago amid a reshuffling at the gym where he worked as a personal trainer. The employees at the gym who helped him find clients lost their jobs, which eventually led to his revenue stream drying up, he said.

For a while, Stewart said he stayed with friends and found work through a temp agency, but eventually he ended up moving into his car.

"It's tough emotionally, mentally, tough physically," he said. "But once you adjust, like anything else — once you learn to live in a foxhole, you're OK. So it took a while, but now I'm used to it."

"Once you learn to survive, you can learn how to be yourself again," he added.

Banks is grateful for the people who trusted her enough to help Stewart. She's quick to remind you how many people have donated time and money. Quick to remind you of people such as Reichers and Stu Harris, a Dublin school board member who helped work with National Church Residences to expedite Stewart's request for an apartment.

Stewart, though, is quick to point out how his change of fortune began.

"None of this would be possible without all the good people supporting her, but she is the initiator," Stewart said.

After experiencing how the internet can bring people together for good and wanting to keep alive the community who rallied around Stewart, Banks, Reichers and others have founded the Starfish Assignment, which partners with local law-enforcement officers who identify needs in their patrol areas and also provides resources and volunteers.

"I'm not saying we're going to be able to help all homeless people like this, but there are people in the community who need small things done for them."

In Stewart's case, the small actions ended up being huge.

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