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Thanks for Giving: Retired Air Force colonel relishes taking care of veterans and their families

From the Thanks for Giving: Stories of St. Louisans giving their time and talents series

Steph Kukuljan

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Vanniecia Brown, left, manager, and James Donahoe, volunteer and president, sit on the porch, Thursday, Nov. 18, 2021, at Fisher House at Jefferson Barracks. Fisher House provides a comfortable place for military and veteran families to stay while a loved one is receiving treatment at the VA Hospital. Photo by Hillary Levin, hlevin@post-dispatch.com

Hillary Levin

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ir Force Col. James Donahoe didn't have much time to think about how he'd spend his retirement.

At his send-off luncheon, the medical director of the Veterans Affairs St. Louis Health Care System leaned over to him and said: "I've got a job for you."

Fourteen years later, Donahoe, 80, is still working. He sits on the board of directors for St. Louis Fisher House, a nonprofit that provides free food and housing for families and caregivers of patients at the Jefferson Barracks VA Medical Center in south St. Louis County.

He first helped raise money to build Fisher House, beginning in 2007, and has spent up to 30 hours a week volunteering since it opened in 2010.

"It's just hard for me to imagine going through the toughest time of your life without your family at your bedside," Donahoe said. "I wanted to do anything to help."

Donahoe grew up in Prestonsburg, Kentucky, and joined the Air Force to satisfy his love of airplanes. He spent the last of his 31 years there operating the military's versions of retail stores and food courts — "My only claim to fame is that I know more about ladies' pantyhose and shoes than any other guy you've known," he said. From there, he headed up the Veterans Canteen Service for 15 years. Donahoe, who is married with two children and four grandchildren, moved the Veterans Canteen Service from Washington to St. Louis, and now lives in west St. Louis County.

The St. Louis Fisher House has served 500 families. Donahoe recently helped fundraise for a \$700,000 bowling alley at the Jefferson Barracks campus that has adaptive equipment to help veterans who have had strokes, amputations or spinal cord injuries. He now is helping with plans to build a second Fisher House at the John Cochran VA Medical Center in the Grand Center neighborhood of St. Louis.



Fisher House in St. Louis at Jefferson Barracks provides a comfortable place for military and veteran families to stay while a loved one is receiving treatment at the VA Hospital. Photo by Hillary Levin, hlevin@post-dispatch.com

Hillary Levin

“When these families want to say thank you, they can hardly do that without crying, it means so much to them,” Donahoe said. “I appreciate taking care of veterans. It’s a great feeling of accomplishment.”



A common area on the main floor at Fisher House at Jefferson Barracks, Thursday, Nov. 18, 2021. Says volunteer and president, James Donahoe, "When guests hear they are staying at a barracks, they don't expect accommodations like this." Fisher House provides a comfortable place for military and veteran families to stay while a loved one is receiving treatment at the VA Hospital. Photo by Hillary Levin, hlevin@post-dispatch.com

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Vanniecia Brown, left, manager, and James Donahoe, volunteer and president, sit together, Thursday, Nov. 18, 2021, in one of the 20 modern, well-appointed, and comfortable guest room suites available at Fisher House at Jefferson Barracks. Says Donahoe, "When guests hear they are staying at a barracks, they don't expect accommodations like this." Fisher House provides a comfortable place for military and veteran families to stay while a loved one is receiving treatment at the VA Hospital. Photo by Hillary Levin, hlevin@post-dispatch.com

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Steph Kukuljan covers real estate and development for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. She is a St. Louis native.