



Photos by Desirée Keegan

Clockwise from above, Director of Suffolk County's Veterans Service Agency, Thomas Ronayne; Rocky Point VFW Post Commander Joe Cognitore; Four Seasons Sunrooms & Windows executive, Brian Fabian; Landmark Properties owner Mark Baisch and Councilman Kevin LaValle teamed up to help build a new home for a veteran in Miller Place; Baisch thanks all those who have helped make building homes for returning veterans possible; and 22 windows will be donated to the next house.

## Building homes for vets with a little help from friends

BY DESIRÉE KEEGAN

Suffolk County has a rich stock of heroes, and lawmakers this week were making special moves to say thanks.

"Of 62 counties, nobody has more veterans who call their county home than we do right here," said Thomas Ronayne, director of the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency.

So, with boasting so many veterans should come a big way of thanking those who return from their huge acts of service. And Rocky Point continues to do just that.

Mark Baisch, a developer and owner of Landmark Properties in Rocky Point, first met VFW Fischer/Hewins Post 6249 Commander Joe Cognitore at a fundraiser that Brookhaven Town Highway Superintendent Dan Losquadro (R) hosted. Baisch

said he didn't know anyone in the room except for Brookhaven Councilman Kevin LaValle (R-Selden).

While speaking, Baisch said Cognitore lamented to him that he'd like to do more for returning veterans.

That's where the idea of building homes came about, after Baisch mentioned a small piece of property in Sound Beach back in 2009. Since then, the two have partnered to build 10 homes for returning veterans, and will soon break ground on the 11th and 12th houses, the next being on Helme Avenue in Miller Place.

"It just shows you how little things can happen and can foster themselves into things like this," Baisch said of his "crazy, chance meeting" that he and Cognitore had. "We are delivering homes nine and 10 on June 6. 'D-Day' is going to be delivery day for us this year."

It was no small undertaking, and Baisch mentioned that besides Cognitore's help, he couldn't have done it without the help of his employees, who work tirelessly to get the job done, and the county and town for taking care of permits, entitlement of land and sanitary flow credits.

"Everyone seems to use me as the catalyst or the lightning rod, but the county and the town do the best that they can to make sure that this program goes off without a hitch," he said.

LaValle said that what he does working with those like Baisch and Cognitore is important to the community.

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— Thomas Ronayne

"What started with a humble beginning — this is what we have to do for our veterans — government working with the private sector to put our veterans first and make sure we take care of the people that take care of us and put their lives at risk for our freedoms here at home," he said.

And others have followed suit.

Four Seasons Sunrooms in Holbrook donated 22 windows and a sliding glass door toward the completion of the next home in Miller Place. LaValle went to high school with Cammie Manganello, marketing manager for the company, who reached out to him because she wanted to get involved.

"I gave Mark a call and everything played out from there," she said. "I think the work they do is excellent. These are people that protect us and they give us the life that we have, so if we can give back in any way, absolutely we should be doing it."

Baisch said the company has never received a donation of windows before, which is a big purchase. Manganello and others hope the donation and the program that Baisch and Cognitore have created, serve as a model to show others what they can be doing.

"It's amazing on Long Island to see how much they care," LaValle said of companies like Landmark Properties and Four Seasons Sunrooms. "It's not always about the bottom line to many of our builders here and Mark is a prime example of that. He gives back."

Ronayne said he agrees, adding that even the veterans work tirelessly, almost



entirely behind the scenes for what veterans deserve and have earned.

He pointed out most specifically the work Cognitore has done.

"We are able to be a part of something so important and so incredibly unique here on Long Island," Ronayne said. "Don't underestimate Joe Cognitore. I always look to see if his wings are visible under his jacket because he really has become a guardian angel to countless veterans. He's a presence in the community, on Long Island, as a national advocate — every step he takes is intended to serve veterans of this great nation."

Baisch said that all those involved are just good people doing the right thing, and added he is honored to be involved in the process.

"I will keep doing this ... I'm not going to stop," he said. "I love this program and I have no plan to stop doing it. It's turned out to be something much more than I ever envisioned when Joe and I started talking about doing this."

