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EAST VALLEY • SCOTTSDALE

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Local groups help veterans get back on feet

By Courtney Cox
For the Tribune



Chris and Corina Esquivel talk about moving into their new apartment at The District at Mountain Vista in Mesa. Esquivel is one of five veterans who will live in the new apartment community for free for the next year thanks to Project We Remember and Kaplan Management Co.

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A U.S. Army veteran of the Iraq war and his family are getting a new place to call home after losing their house to foreclosure.

Chris and Corina Esquivel returned to the United States from Germany nearly a year ago but did not get the homecoming they were hoping for.

The family was met by a tough U.S. economy and even tougher job market.

The Esquivels have been living with a relative since Chris Esquivel lost his job and their Gilbert home was foreclosed on in February.

He said it is not uncommon for soldiers returning from active duty to have trouble readjusting to everyday life.

“For any soldier, it’s the reintegration back into the private sector that’s the hardest thing,” Esquivel said.

The couple and their two children lived in Germany for almost three years, and leaving the Army base was a big change.

“You’re in a family overseas, and you come back here and you’re on your own,” Corina Esquivel said.

Thanks to two local organizations, the family now has someone fighting for them.

Kaplan Management Co. and Project We Remember will provide free housing for one year for the Esquivels and four other United States veterans.

Kaplan celebrated the grand opening of The District at Mountain Vista in Mesa, its latest luxury apartment complex, Friday with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and a tribute to U.S. veterans.

Matt Summers, president of the company, wanted to honor U.S. veterans by providing free housing for one year after they return home from abroad.

"This is a hand up, not a handout," Summers said. "We want to inspire other management companies to do the same thing."

He is so happy with the current project, Kaplan plans to implement a similar plan in Texas, Massachusetts and Arkansas within a year.

Summers said that when it comes to helping others, "It's about doing, not just about talking."

Summers contacted Project We Remember, a local nonprofit organization that was founded in 2006 by Vern Bagley, to find worthy veterans whom he could help.

Bagley is a Vietnam veteran who started the organization to provide support for U.S. veterans.

He said he learned firsthand that veterans do not always get the support system and honor they deserve after coming home from serving their country.

Bagley was criticized and condemned after returning to the United States from Vietnam in 1968. He created Project We Remember in 2006 to help ensure that others would not have to endure similar treatment.

"We are always looking for people who are trying to improve their lives and have just run across an unfortunate circumstance," Bagley said.

The nonprofit group utilizes the VA Hospital, Arizona Department of Veterans Services and Veteran Centers to find candidates.

Bagley said his organization is funded purely by individual donations and does not receive any federal funds.

The experience has been like a dream for the Esquivels, who say the whole experience seems to have happened overnight.

Chris Esquivel is starting a new job in the coming week and said he plans to utilize his Army benefits to go back to school.

The Esquivel family is confident the next year will be a real opportunity for them to get back on their feet.

"What can you do but hit the ground running?" Esquivel said.