

Nonprofit builder helps meet wounded Iraq veteran's housing needs

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Nicholas Koulchar, shown cooking, says, 'There's no sense being mopey.' He plans to race in Chicago's marathon today.

Nicholas Koulchar's mother left when he was young. His father died in 2002.

The Montrose man cared for his younger brother and tried to keep the family house, but lost it.

For a time, he was homeless. Nothing was going right, so Koulchar — looking for a drastic change in his life — joined the Army in 2006.



Nicholas Koulchar, 31, plays with one of his dogs, Blitzhelm, while his wife, Dani Koulchar, 28, cooks dinner in their home in Macomb Township on Friday, Oct. 11, 2013.
Kimberly P. Mitchell/Detroit Free Press

On Aug. 26, 2008, the Army sergeant was performing clearance duties in Sadr City, Iraq, riding in an armored vehicle about the size of a school bus, when an explosive device hit the side of it.

The driver was killed. Koulchar, a gunner inside, initially thought his legs were broken and dragged himself to the back of the vehicle.

He was taken to an evacuation vehicle, and a surgical team pumped him with painkillers and jammed gauze in his wounds so he could be airlifted to Baghdad. Within 24 hours, Koulchar said, he had four major surgeries and had to be resuscitated numerous times. He eventually returned to the U.S. and spent more than two years at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

Both of his legs were amputated above the knee.

“I was raised, always taught, that life happens. You embrace it. You adapt to it and you drive on,” said the 31-year-old Macomb Township resident. “There’s no sense being mopey.”

And mopey he isn’t.

Koulchar plans to race with a handcycle in his second Chicago marathon today and his fourth Detroit marathon next Sunday, where he hopes to record his personal best of finishing in less than two hours.

The day before the Detroit Free Press/Talmer Bank Marathon, Koulchar will celebrate another milestone — the groundbreaking of his own house designed to meet his needs. It's being built by Homes for Our Troops on a more-than-two-acre lot surrounded by woods in Brighton.

How excited is Koulchar about his new home?

“You have no idea,” said Dan Higgins, volunteer leader in Michigan for Homes for Our Troops.



Nicholas Koulchar, 31, and his wife, Dani Koulchar, 28, with their dogs, Blitzhelm and Demo at home in Macomb Township on Friday. Nicholas Koulchar is a disabled Army veteran and will get a new home for free through Homes for Our Troops.

Kimberly P. Mitchell/Detroit Free Press

In June, Koulchar married Higgins' daughter, Dani. The two plan to live in the one-story house, which is expected to be built in five months.

Higgins said it will be the third house completed in Michigan by the national nonprofit. The others are in Middleville and the Macomb Township house where Koulchar is currently living.

That home was built for Army Spec. Alex Knapp, a double-leg amputee who died in 2010 after playing sled hockey, less than a year after he got the keys to the house.

Koulchar, a national service officer with the Disabled American Veterans in Detroit, has been living in the house since 2011. He wanted a more country-like setting where he and his wife can start a family. The location also is closer to family members and Ann Arbor, where Koulchar receives his primary VA care.

Homes for Our Troops plans to build three more homes in Michigan — in Eaton Rapids, Grand Haven and Wayne County, Higgins said. The group has built 141 homes across the country since 2004 for severely injured veterans, and 36 other homes are in progress, according to its website.

The homes are zero cost to veterans and are designed to accommodate their needs, such as lower kitchen counters and cooktops, wider doorways and handicap-accessible bathrooms. Higgins said they can cost \$250,000 to \$300,000 to build, but noted “there is no amount that’s too much to help.”

Koulchar, who credited younger brother Mike Koulchar for helping him pull through since the accident, said he’s endured physical pain and mental anguish.

It’s always darkest right before the dawn, he said. And part of what kept him going was knowing that despite his injuries, he was still breathing. He was still alive.

“The people that tried to kill me didn’t win,” he said. “They might have taken me out of the front line, but they didn’t take me out of the fight.”

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