

Safe Havens for the Needy

Unsung Virginian Award winner instrumental in community-based housing

Laura's Houses began with a three-bedroom, red-brick townhouse in Fairfax, Va., in 2006. But that wasn't enough, so Ted Moriak kept at it.

The project added another townhouse a year later, and a third in nearby Annandale soon after. But those weren't enough, either, so Moriak kept at it.

And by the time Moriak took a breather, the Northern Virginia-based Brain Foundation had nine houses in its portfolio to provide safe and secure places to live for three dozen individuals with brain-related injuries or diseases.

For his relentless efforts to tap loans and grants to buy houses while cutting through red tape, the retired economist is the 2020 recipient of the Unsung Virginian Award, presented by the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives. Bestowed annually since 1968, the Unsung Virginian Award honors a citizen, who has not previously been recognized, for services rendered to the commonwealth without thought of personal gain.

"Not only did he get us all this money, but he is so giving and noncritical," says Trudy Harsh, founder of the Brain Foundation. "I get angry and when you're with Ted, he can smooth things over. We couldn't have been luckier than to have Ted do all this work."

MEETING A NEED

Harsh started the foundation in recognition of her daughter, Laura, who dealt emotionally and physically for 30 years with the aftermath of a brain tumor. Harsh wanted to fill a housing gap for individuals like Laura created by the shuttering of many mental health facilities.



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— Trudy Harsh, Brain Foundation

That's where Moriak, a Centreville resident, entered the scene. He'd had a long and successful career as an economist in the federal government. In fact, he was project leader of a U.S. Department of Agriculture study of Puerto Rico's economy that landed on President Carter's desk during consideration of the territory's possible conversion to statehood.

"My wife said, 'You're retiring as a budget officer and you got all this money for Department of Agriculture programs. Why don't you help Trudy buy some houses?'" he recalls with a laugh.



PHOTO BY STEVEN JOHNSON

Easier said than done. For starters, the Brain Foundation was looking to enter an expensive market in Northern Virginia. As a real estate executive, Harsh could deal with that. What she couldn't imagine were the fundraising skills and bureaucratic expertise needed to bring Laura's Houses to fruition.

NAVIGATING THE BUREAUCRACY

Enter Moriak as director of loans and grants. "Anywhere that someone suggested for funding, Ted followed up. He did all the paperwork, and that's no small thing," Harsh says.

At one point, he went to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, seeking \$1 million for four houses. The Brain Foundation got the award, but the first mortgages were insufficient, so he successfully worked with Fairfax County and Virginia state government to compensate for the difference.



Laura's House, purchased in 2007, located in Annandale, Va.



Laura's House, purchased in 2010, located in Fairfax City, Va.

"Housing is perhaps one of the most difficult and vexing problems facing people with disabilities. It requires both a giving heart and a head for numbers. Ted has been the financial brains of this organization and an incredible advocate," says Bill Fuller of Virginia Housing, a state agency.

A member of Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative, Moriak has held an array of community leadership positions, including president of the Southwestern Youth Association, vice president of the Chantilly High School PTA and member of the Fairfax County Athletic Council, among other causes.

It's made a difference. Dotti McKee, who served on the Brain Foundation board with Moriak, said her son's life turned around after years of difficult brain disease when he found housing.

"When we provide safe and affordable housing for our homeless and mentally ill, we can better offer them treatment and improve their lives," she says. ■