

The rugged Colorado town of Cripple Creek sits atop an almost unfathomable amount of gold.

At an elevation of 9,494 feet and with a population of 1,189, Cripple Creek itself is hard core. Miners log 12-hour shifts gathering and processing gold. Winters are long and tough. A half-dozen casinos illuminate the dark, nearly empty downtown streets on a recent weeknight.

Like their town, members of Victor-Cripple Creek American Legion Post 171 have rough exteriors. But inside, they have hearts of gold.

Recently they turned their attention to refurbishing the dilapidated home of post-9/11 Marine veteran and post member Andrew Smith and his 7-year-old son, Laren, who has muscular dystrophy.

“I like the idea of veterans helping veterans, and I knew of Andrew’s plight and the situation he was facing here,” said post member and project leader Curt Sorenson, who lives across the road from Smith. “He is just a really good guy, and I wanted to help him.”

Smith is a single father with sole custody of Laren. “He has literally brought his daddy back from combat in a matter of six years,” said Smith, who was a machine gunner in Iraq.

Earlier this year, Sorenson and his wife returned to their summer home in Cripple Creek. “We wondered what happened,” he said. “There was no sign of Andrew and the house was closed up. We found out what the story was: the home was uninhabitable.”

Smith, who has a 100 percent disability rating, and his son battled bronchitis continually for six months before the black mold was discovered. “We were getting sicker and sicker,” he recalled. “So we started pulling all the mold out, and it turned into major reconstruction.”

The mold was everywhere. Once it was removed and the air was safe, they moved on to putting the home back together. A friend tried to help, but his attempt to redo the plumbing system didn’t pass inspection.

So the Smiths were forced from their home, which has a beautiful view overlooking downtown Cripple Creek and mountains in the distance. “This is our home. This is our community. Laren’s friends are here.”

With Smith and Laren forced to live in Oklahoma with family, Sorenson stepped in. He proposed refurbishing Smith’s home as a community project, and Post 171 gave unanimous approval.

“We want to see him back in his house,” said Sorenson, who served in the Navy during the Vietnam era. “He is deeply appreciative of the fact that people here care. He has a

lot of friends in Cripple Creek. And Laren has a lot of friends here. It's just something you should do — help your fellow man, help your fellow veteran."

So far post members have completed an assessment, created a plan and begun work on the home. Outside it, they are constructing a ramp for Laren, who sometimes uses a wheelchair. Next comes finding electrical and plumbing contractors.

"When the guys are working on the project, who knows who is going to show up," Sorenson said of the post, which has increased from 10 to 50 members in recent years. "People dive in and help. If they don't pitch in with their physical labor, they pitch in with money. We have a nice little war chest, not enough to do the job. But I am convinced that we will get enough to finish the job."

Adjutant Rich Ingold said the post has "never done anything this large, though we do various community service projects."

In addition to post members, Ingold credits Cripple Creek residents and businesses for contributing to the effort. The plan is to get the Smiths back in their home next summer.

"It will be a big event when he returns," Ingold said. "We want to have a party. It will be meaningful for him. It will be meaningful for all the members who contributed to the project."

The post's efforts have Smith hoping to return in a matter of months, not the five to six years he figured.

"There were points in time when my hope and faith got pretty thin," he said. "There was one point in time when I was willing to put the home up for sale so I didn't have to make payments on it. But I was sure going to miss my home, my community. It wasn't long after that The American Legion in Cripple Creek wanted to get involved and said, 'We'd be honored if you let us.' The amount of honor that they get from helping me with my house doesn't compare to the amount of honor I get from them helping me."

A return to Cripple Creek would especially benefit Laren. His doctors and therapists are all in Cripple Creek, most of them walking distance from their home. Just as importantly, so are his friends. "Just the other week, he named 13 of his friends from Cripple Creek. I was beside myself," Smith said. "To know they were so special to him that he would remember them. This is a special place."

Cripple Creek provides a network for both father and son.

"I feel like this is my home," Smith said. "I have brothers behind me. I have a lot of self-worth now. I've loved this place from the start. It's the same place I've believed it to be. I hope to be able to get to the point where I can give back to other members of this community. That's how I would like to show my gratitude."

In the Cripple Creek-Victor area, 400,000 ounces of gold will be produced this year. "One of the biggest producing areas of gold in this country," Sorenson boasted.

And just as the mine operators and chemical processors combine their skills to extract gold from the ore, Cripple Creek Legionnaires and community members are working together to pull Smith from despair.

“You have camaraderie just being veterans,” Sorenson said. “But now you have camaraderie around a common cause.”

For more information about the project, contact post adjutant Rich Ingold at alpost171adj@gmail.com or (719) 761-5606. Tax deductible donations may be sent to American Legion Post 171, P.O. Box 604, Cripple Creek, Colo. 80813