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Local Veteran with Asperger's Turns Personal Disaster into Lifeline for Osceola County's Most Vulnerable

Kissimmee, Florida — Joe never thought his own life would start to look like the disaster scenes he had spent 25 years walking into.

Joe lives with autism/Asperger's and other challenges, and he has walked the same road as many people in special education, people with ADHD, social disorders, and learning disabilities. He wants every person with a disability to know this:

"Do not give up on your dream. Do not let anyone tell you that you cannot be a contractor, a firefighter, an EMT, a director, a teacher, a professor, a doctor, a lawyer, a politician, or anything else you are called to be. I went to special ed and I still went into the military. I still went to college. I still help people. Those of us with special needs can do anything we set our minds to. Our disability is not a crutch; it is a tool. What we lose in one area, we gain in our special strengths. Find your place, fight for it, and keep fighting. We might walk differently, study harder, stutter, or have meltdowns — but we also bring heart, insight, and grit. I want every brother and sister with disabilities to know: we belong here, and we can serve with our whole heart."

Joe points to his own life as proof.

He is a local man on the autism spectrum (Asperger's), a U.S. Navy combat veteran, and the founder of two nonprofits: MDR Disaster Relief and Veterans Outreach, based in Pennsylvania, and now Heaven-Sent Community Services and Veterans Assistance in Florida. Over more than 25 years, including 10 years leading MDR, Joe has helped support over 144 national disaster relief operations across the United States, working alongside FEMA, the American Red Cross, and other partners to help families rebuild after hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and other catastrophes.

For most of his adult life, his role was clear: he was the guy who showed up when everything fell apart.



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Then everything fell apart at home.

A family crisis forced Joe to walk away from his college degree so he could care for the woman he loves, Kimmy, after she was hurt. At the same time, his two kids needed him more than ever: his son CJ, who like Joe is highly functioning on the autism spectrum, and his daughter Emma, pushing through to complete her criminal justice degree so she could work with vulnerable children and youth. Joe and Kimmy's children grew up in this work; CJ and Emma started helping on disaster deployments when they were about 12 and 9 years old, learning early what it means to serve families on their worst days.

The man who had always been strong on deployment suddenly found himself struggling just to keep his own family stable.

In a moment of frustration during a conflict at home, Joe plucked his son in the mouth with his finger. That split-second decision led to his arrest and four months in jail. For a man who had served his country, rushed into disaster zones, and dedicated his life to helping others, sitting behind bars was devastating. When he walked out, he carried a record, deep regret, and a choice: let this be the end of his story or let it be the turning point.

When Joe's case moved into the court system, he made one of the hardest decisions of his life. His own attorney believed they could win at trial, but Joe could not ignore what that process might do to his son, CJ. CJ had already been traumatized once before, falsely blamed for writing on a wall at his high school; even after he was cleared, the experience left him with meltdowns and a deep fear of police and crowds. To this day, he remembers everything about those moments and still cries and panics when he sees officers, even at Halloween or during parades. Joe knew that if this case went to trial, CJ would be forced to relive that trauma in a courtroom, questioned and watched by strangers.

"My son did exactly what we taught him — if someone hits you, call the police," Joe says. "I could never punish him by dragging him through court just to prove a point about my own pride."

So even when Joe's own attorney was confident, they could win, Joe chose to accept a plea agreement that kept CJ off the witness stand and out of the spotlight. "I was willing to carry the consequences myself if it meant protecting my son. I love my family. I would rather live with a record than live with knowing I broke my boy's spirit."

Joe chose to make it a turning point.

He started looking at his own community the same way he would size up a disaster site: Who is most at risk? Who is invisible to the system? Who is one bad day away from losing everything — and who is going to show up for them? He saw families like his own: veterans trying to navigate benefits and trauma; parents on the spectrum overwhelmed by forms and appointments; caregivers forced to sacrifice education or work to keep loved ones safe.

Out of that realization, Joe and Kimmy transitioned their earlier nonprofit work through MDR into a new chapter in Florida by founding Heaven-Sent Community Services and Veterans Assistance, a grassroots effort to build a local safety net for people caught in slow-motion disasters — families on the edge of homelessness, veterans slipping through cracks, and neurodivergent parents and kids who rarely see services designed with them in mind.



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Heaven-Sent does not look like a big national agency. There are no fleets of trucks or massive command posts. Instead, Joe rides the bus and Sun Rail between Kissimmee and Orlando with a backpack, a phone, and a lifetime of disaster-relief experience. His “office” might be a borrowed church classroom, a corner of a community center, or a table in a coffee shop where he meets a veteran a day away from eviction or a parent who has just lost housing and has no idea where to turn.

By day, Joe is knocking on doors of agencies, landlords, and partners, translating complex systems into clear steps for the families he serves. He helps them fill out forms, apply for assistance, and understand what is coming next. He draws directly on his autism experience, breaking overwhelming processes into manageable pieces and offering the kind of patient, direct communication that many on the spectrum need but rarely get.

By night, when the offices are closed, the emergencies often begin. A veteran sleeping in a car. A family in a motel about to run out of nights. A caregiver who just got cut off from work and does not know how they will make rent. Joe treats these calls the way he treated disaster deployments: he triages, he listens, he stabilizes what he can in the moment, and then he builds a plan. Instead of handing out false promises, he connects people to real resources — shelter options, food, mental health support, legal referrals — and walks with them through the process.

“Heaven-Sent operates on a simple idea,” Joe says. “No one should have to face their worst day alone, and no one’s worst mistake should be the last word on their life.”

Joe is open about his past when it can help someone else. When he talks to fathers who feel like they have failed, or veterans who carry both visible and invisible scars, he does not pretend to be perfect. He tells them, “I’ve made mistakes I wish I could take back. I paid for them. But I’m still here, and I’m still serving. If I can rebuild, you can too.” Coming from a man who has seen combat, disasters, jail, and recovery, those words carry weight.

His daughter, now with her criminal justice degree and working in a child- and youth-focused role, reflects the outcome Joe fights for: young people from struggling families not only surviving, but stepping into careers that protect others. His son, a high-functioning Asperger’s young man like his father, is a daily reminder that neurodivergent individuals are not broken — they just need systems and support that fit them. That understanding shapes Heaven-Sent’s approach: slower conversations when needed, clear expectations, and no judgment for needing extra time or repetition.

In a region where hurricanes, high rents, and fragile incomes constantly push people to the edge, Heaven-Sent is becoming a quiet but crucial line of defense. It is the phone call before a family ends up on the street, the knock on the door after a storm, and the steady presence in between. Joe has taken everything he learned in FEMA staging areas and Red Cross shelters and scaled it down to the neighborhood level, turning large-scale disaster principles into everyday crisis prevention.

“I used to fly into other people’s disasters,” Joe says. “Then I lived through my own. Now I’m called to make sure what I went through becomes a lifeline for someone else, not just a scar I carry.”

For families who do not know who to call, for veterans who feel forgotten, and for neurodivergent parents who feel misunderstood, a local Asperger’s man who has seen the worst of life is quietly



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building something rare: a community safety net woven from humility, hard experience, and the belief that even after disaster, people deserve a path to dignity.

And Heaven-Sent is not just an idea — it is already on the ground, serving people no one else is reaching. In Osceola County, Joe and a small band of volunteers have already fed about 150 people, placing hot meals and groceries into the hands of veterans, seniors, unhoused neighbors, and struggling families who might otherwise go without. They have handed out clothing, shoes, and hygiene kits so people can face job interviews, school, or simply another day with a bit more dignity and warmth.

Heaven-Sent is not working alone. Joe and his team are already partnering with the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida and engaged with the Continuum of Care (CoC) efforts in Orange, Seminole, and Osceola Counties, as well as a coalition of nonprofit organizations focused on housing and homelessness. Together, they are trying to build a coordinated safety net so veterans, disabled residents, and seniors do not fall through the cracks simply because they do not know where to go.

Over the years, Joe's work has involved cooperation with a wide range of disaster and humanitarian partners, including Navy Safe Harbor, Adventist disaster services, faith-based camps and academies, Mississippi emergency and homeless coalitions, local fire departments, food ministries, and veteran organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, and others — along with national and regional relief partners like the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Team Rubicon, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, Mennonite Disaster Service, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Lutheran and United Methodist disaster ministries, United Way and PA 211, and many more. These long-standing relationships help Heaven-Sent mobilize donated supplies and volunteer labor quickly when communities are in need.

But the work is being held back by one simple, fixable problem: space!

Joe has relationships with more than 400 vendors from past disaster-relief deployments — major retailers, manufacturers, and partners who are willing to donate pallets of food, clothing, building materials, household goods, and emergency supplies to support Osceola County's most vulnerable. The trucks are ready. The donations are ready. The community's need is undeniable.

What Heaven-Sent does not have is a place to unload and store those tractor-trailer loads.

Right now, opportunities to bring in massive in-kind support are being lost because there is no warehouse, no yard, no donated lot where a semi can safely back in and be offloaded. Without storage, those supplies cannot be staged, organized, and distributed to the people who need them most. A simple storage solution — a small warehouse, an unused city building, a donated lot with a container setup — could unlock major donated goods for Osceola County.

On top of that, Heaven-Sent is working toward a bigger vision: transitional housing for veterans, disabled residents, and seniors who have nowhere safe to go after crisis. Joe knows from years on the front lines that a hot meal and a hygiene kit help for a day — but stable, supportive housing changes the trajectory of a life. To make that vision real, Heaven-Sent needs land: a piece of ground where small, modest, code-compliant transitional housing can be built for those who have served, those who live with disabilities, and those who stood by this community their whole lives.



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Heaven-Sent says this work is backed by a veteran-led leadership team and board structure with program, finance, disaster relief, and veterans-services oversight. Public leadership pages list Tim Lehman as Director of Disaster Relief & Emergency Services and Chief Communications & Development Officer, MSG Darrell Whited (Ret.) as Chief Program Officer and Director of Veterans Services, and Norman Fraser as Chief Financial Officer. Public Heaven-Sent pages also state that the organization has leadership or chapter presence tied to Pennsylvania and to Mississippi and Alabama. A Mississippi chapter page names Darrell Whited as Director for Mississippi and Alabama, while Heaven-Sent's site also identifies Tim Lehman with the Pennsylvania chapter.

"This community has always stepped up after hurricanes and big disasters," Joe says. "Now I am asking our leaders to step up for the quiet disasters — the veteran in his car, the disabled neighbor with nowhere to go, the senior who cannot keep up with rising costs. Give us the space, and we will do the work."

A Call to Action for Osceola County

Heaven-Sent is asking residents, businesses, and leaders to take specific action:

- Contact Osceola County Commissioners and Kissimmee and St. Cloud City Council members and urge them to help Heaven-Sent secure a safe, accessible place in Osceola County to receive and store donated supplies — somewhere a tractor-trailer can unload, and where food, clothing, and emergency goods can be safely staged and distributed.
- Help identify and secure land where transitional housing for veterans, disabled residents, and seniors can be built.
- Property owners, churches, and businesses with unused lots or warehouse space are encouraged to contact Heaven-Sent to discuss donations, low-cost leases, or partnership options.

"Heaven-Sent is not asking for a handout," Joe says. "We are asking for a chance to multiply what is already in motion — a chance to turn decades of disaster experience, some hard personal lessons, and a whole lot of love for this community into something bigger than one man with a backpack and a bus pass."

If local leaders step up with storage, land, and support, Joe and the complete Heaven-Sent Team are ready to step up with the rest: the work, the relationships, the sweat, and the heart.

Leadership Contacts

- Joe Ryan, Florida Chief Program Officer, Founding Director & Executive Director — (689) 204-1989 ext. 101, Cell (717) 623-0164, joepres@heaven-sent-veterans-outreach.org
- Tim Lehman, Pennsylvania Chief Programs Officer, Director of Disaster Relief & Emergency Services / Chief Communications & Development Officer — (689) 262-6691 ext. 102, timdisasterrelief1@heaven-sent-veterans-outreach.org



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- MSG Darrell Whited (Ret.), Mississippi/Alabama Chief Program Officer / Director of Veterans Services — (689) 262-6524 ext. 103, commandercorner@heaven-sent-veterans-outreach.org
- Norman Fraser, Chief Financial Officer — financial contact available through the Executive Office

About Heaven-Sent Community Services and Veterans Assistance

Heaven-Sent Community Services and Veterans Assistance is a grassroots, veteran-led organization based in Osceola County, Florida. Its public materials say it serves veterans, seniors, individuals with disabilities, spouses, caregivers, children, and families under pressure through outreach, case support, housing help, advocacy, faith-centered encouragement, and practical assistance. Heaven-Sent published leadership and chapter pages also indicate offices or chapter presence connected to Alabama, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania, building on the legacy of MDR Disaster Relief and Veterans Outreach's work with veterans, first responders, seniors, and disabled people across multiple states.