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Loudon

## Back to what matters

After a trying year, man gets help returning to hobby

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Following a year that delivered one blow after another to a Loudon man, a local company has pitched in to help rebuild his sanctuary.

The trials of Kerry and Sharon Drake began when their beloved German shepherd died of cancer. Then, they struggled to care for Sharon Drake's elderly father and battled his insurance company to find the right assisted living facility.

Then came Kerry Drake's three-month sabbatical from his job as information technology director of the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund. Kerry Drake, 42, planned to spend most of the time rebuilding his backyard workshop, where he spends time making furniture. On the sixth day of his sabbatical, right after he tore down the old workshop, doctors diagnosed him with thyroid cancer.

He underwent two major surgeries, one

requiring 27 staples that left a rose-colored scar around his throat. And in the days surrounding the first surgery, he lost his uncle during an unrelated surgery and his father to a heart attack.

"2007 was just an awful year," he said. "If I could skip that year, I would give it up."

Kerry Drake's oncologist now hopes to contain his cancer through one more surgery. With the grueling rounds of radiation behind him for now, he has looked to get back to his hobby. Friends helped start the job recently, and with the help of a local construction company, he should be back in a newly built shop before the first big snow.

The entire working crew of the Webster-based Cedar Mill Group volunteered yesterday to finish the major work. The six men from the residential remodeling and building company sheathed the skeletal walls with plywood and placed metal panels on the roof, weatherproofing the small building so it would be ready for the winter.

A neighbor of the Drakes had approached Geoff Martin, owner of the construction group, and asked whether the company could donate labor to complete the project. After learning of the family's situation, he quickly agreed.

"I don't think it's fair to live in a community and just take from that community," Martin said. "You need to go out into the community and show positive energy, not just hold on to every last dime you own."

The men seemed in good spirits yesterday, joking over a box of Dunkin' Donuts coffee as they took a break from laying plywood onto the rafters. The day was enjoyable both for the service it provided and the chance to bring men who worked in the office and onsite together for a common goal, said David Meeken, a production manager.

"It's nice to come together on a project like this and help someone," he said. "It's a win-win situation."



WILLIAM DeSHAZER / Monitor staff  
Brett Cusick hands up a new piece of roofing to David Meeken yesterday, as the volunteers help finish up a new workshop for Kerry Drake, who was diagnosed with cancer last year.

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Kerry Drake left work at midday to bring the workers a pizza lunch. As someone who works at a nonprofit, he said, it's a funny feeling to be on the receiving end of organized assistance.

"It's amazing and humbling and slightly embarrassing," he said. "I'm not used to being in the 'Jesus, I need some help' list, not the 'What can I do to help you' list."

He's excited to get the shed heated and lighted, though, and to unpack the tools he's been storing since his plan to build the new shed was interrupted last summer. Sharon Drake's brother, who lives with them and looked on yesterday as the men worked, remarked that Kerry Drake "has more tools than Lowe's and Home Depot."

As soon as those tools can be moved out of a neighbor's storage space and into the new workshop, Kerry Drake plans to begin building something new, perhaps cabinets for the kitchen. Creating things is something he enjoys, a pastime that distracts him and gives him an outlet he doesn't find working with computers.

"I like to build stuff," he said. "My job is working with computers and software. You go to work all day and don't have anything to show."

With 90 percent of his energy back, Kerry Drake hopes the worst is over. And, he said, he's thankful for the help he's found among his friends, family and neighbors.

"We're lucky to live in a small enough community that people are willing to take time out of the day to lend a hand to people who need it," Drake said.

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