

## Long Road to New Home

### **Community celebrates return of paralyzed Wheaton soldier**

**By James Fuller**

*Daily Herald Staff Writer*

Posted Saturday, September 03, 2005

The handmade banner reading "Homecoming for Sgt. Joel Gomez" covered the garage door. Some 400 red, white and blue balloons bobbed in the breeze on the front lawn. The yellow ribbon tied up the front door in a perfect present. This was the day for which virtually an entire community had prayed and toiled.

Yet the reality that was finally here may have been hard to grasp for the recipients of the extraordinary gift. Gomez's family walked around their new house with smiles. His niece and nephew, Sonia and Julio Sanchez, chased each other around the yard like they'd lived there their whole lives.

It was nervous energy. Gomez' father, Al, didn't even realize he'd left the house without Joel's clothes until he reached Hines VA Hospital in Maywood. Then again, Gomez's homecoming wouldn't be complete without a little trademark drama.

"There's been so many setbacks, so many detours," said Betty Welker of Wheaton, a Gomez supporter. "It's been a long road."

Gomez has been in and out of hospitals since the Wheaton community began a quest to build him a home nearly a year ago, shortly after he was paralyzed in Iraq, to replace the small Wheaton apartment in which his family was living.

He battled pneumonia, bed sores, infections, surgeries, fear of death and loss of hope at various points in those months.

So for most of the people who pitched in along the way, a homecoming just didn't seem real until Gomez's van pulled into his new driveway Friday.

Then smiles chased tears as applause welcomed Gomez even before his wheelchair was lowered down the van's lift.

"Amazing," Gomez said in reaction to seeing his new home for the first time.

His sister, Noemi Sanchez, wiped a tear with a paper towel as she filmed her brother's first look at his new living room.

He will spend the next few days adjusting to his high-tech bed and surroundings, but his thoughts are of the future.

The 24-year-old wants to go back to school, a dream the government can help fund. He plans to study law and become an advocate for veterans.

"Many of them pretty much have to rely on themselves and what little family they have," he said. "I want to give them the opportunities that I've been afforded in this lifetime."

Court Airhart, of Airhart Construction, believes Gomez's new home offers the Wheaton soldier a whole new quality of life. The home's construction was led by Airhart and a team of developers with the idea of tailoring the house to Gomez's needs. That mission spawned "The Freedom Home" with high-tech gadgets that will bring Gomez as close to independence as possible.

"He hasn't been able to open a door for himself all this time," Airhart said. "Now he even has the freedom to let himself outside and move around. I'm feeling awfully good about what everybody did."

Many of Gomez's caregivers attended the homecoming. They won't disappear just because he's home. Officials from Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital in Wheaton said they'll arrange for outpatient care to keep him flexible and healthy.

Dr. Bernard Nemchausky, one of Gomez's caregivers at Hines, said the key for all veterans paralyzed like Gomez is to survive the inevitable ailments and continue with life.

Gomez's new ability to get around will improve his life "1,000 percent," Nemchausky said. But in some ways, Gomez's homecoming is bittersweet for a caregiver who works with injured veterans daily.

"All the veterans in the hospital are upset because one person gets all this attention, and you don't hear about them all," Nemchausky said. "This is great, but we should be able to do this for everybody."

That's exactly the goal of Michelle Senatore, perhaps Gomez's most active advocate. She hopes Gomez's life serves as an example to the federal government of the care all veterans deserve for their service.

"This was about being able to actually set a goal and reach it and have it be given to someone who really needs it," she said. "It just takes a little passion."

## The Freedom Bed

Gomez will sleep in a \$35,000 voice-controlled bed made by ProBed that will move him frequently.



Moving the body up and down

**Shifting the body:** It is important for a quadruplicate's body to move. This helps prevent pressure ulcers, or bed sores, and reduces respiratory and bladder infections. The bed, which can be voice-controlled, will move automatically — and silently — while Gomez sleeps.



Moving the body on its side

# Living independently

Army Sgt. Joel Gomez, 24, looks to his new home to restore some of the normalcy he enjoyed before being paralyzed from the neck down in Iraq last year. The house, which he moved into Friday, has a voice-activated computer that allows him to do things such as change the television channel, make phone calls and surf the Internet.

*Note: Bed images courtesy ProBed  
Drawing is schematic.*

Source: SAJE Technology, ProBed and Airhart Construction  
DAILY HERALD GRAPHIC/JASON MCGREGOR

### Opening doors

Using his voice, Gomez can give a command to automatically open his bedroom door, the home's front door and the door that connects his bedroom to an outside deck.

### Deep counters

The bathroom and kitchen counters are deeper than the standard so Gomez's wheelchair can fit under them.

### Lots of closet space

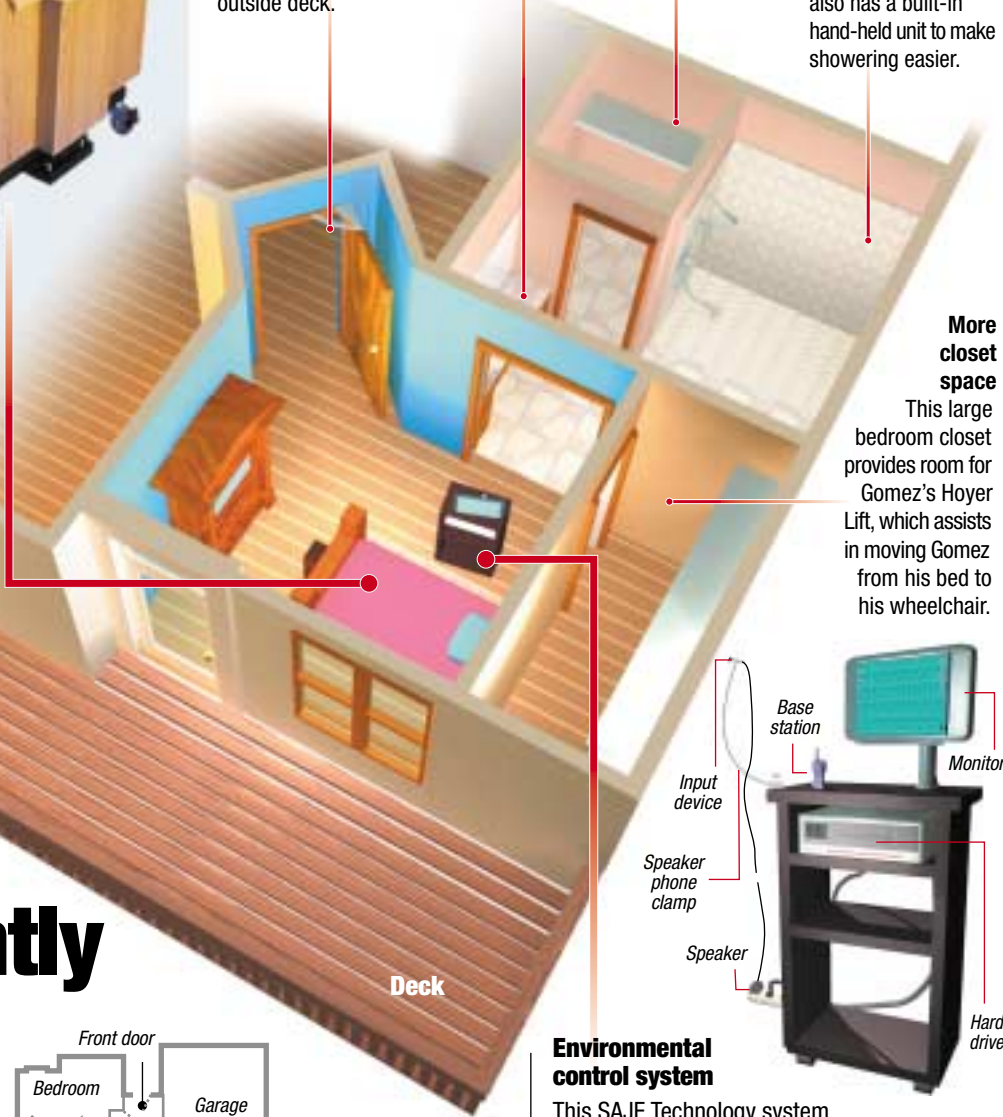
Ample closet space is important to Gomez. Keeping his medical equipment out of constant view helps him maintain a normal living area.

### Specially designed shower

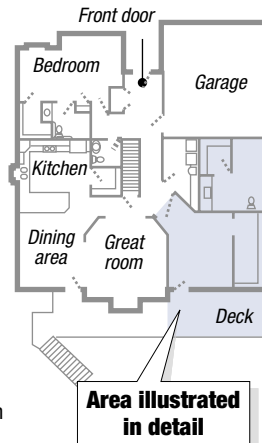
This larger-than-normal shower allows room for Gomez's shower chair, which provides him the support he needs when he is not in his wheelchair. The shower also has a built-in hand-held unit to make showering easier.

### More closet space

This large bedroom closet provides room for Gomez's Hoyer Lift, which assists in moving Gomez from his bed to his wheelchair.



Deck



Area illustrated in detail

### The first floor

Gomez can open the front door and use an outside camera by voice command. The hardwood floors make it easier for him to move his wheelchair around. A basement with additional bedrooms is below the first floor.

### Environmental control system

This SAJE Technology system provides Gomez with the ability to operate almost anything that can be controlled by remote using a simple voice command. There are two devices that relay Gomez's command to the computer's hard drive:

**Input device:** Microphone acts as a speaker phone, shown here, or can be shown on a head set. Once activated, it transmits voice commands to the base station.

**Base station:** Gets a wireless signal from input device, sends Gomez's commands to the hard drive. It also is Gomez's telephone.

