

## Regaining A Reputation



Born in Cortland and raised in Moravia, Rick Walrad, 56, had it going on. He graduated 10<sup>th</sup> in his Army class, is an ace at construction work, and holds certifications in a range of building trades, including HVAC and lead abatement. He's the guy you want on your job to install windows, mount cabinets, lay tile, move doors, and supervise workers. Rick admits he's loud and bossy on the job site, but he gets things done and done right, and takes pride in his work.

After chasing hurricanes for the work in Florida in the late 1990s, Rick returned to Cayuga County and took up lead abatement for a local contractor. Continuous exposure to the toxic material resulted in super high levels of lead in his blood, but his doctor made a misdiagnosis and it was left untreated. Eventually the levels got so high, Rick had a psychotic break, which led to a violent incident and landed him in prison for ten years.

Rick recovered and stabilized while incarcerated, and was discharged in 2015. He graduated from Unity House's PROSperity program, and has been receiving independent housing supports for three and a half years. To get past his self-proclaimed boredom, Rick is now deeply involved with the local Habitat for Humanity project.

"Habitat filled a big void in my life," said Rick. "I needed something to do, and this gives me the chance to use my talents and tools." He puts in about 25-30 hours a week on the project.

Satisfied with his current situation, Rick is not looking for paid work, but he is seeking something perhaps even more important: the restoration of his reputation.

"I was a good boy before, and I'm a good boy after," Rick continues. "There was just this one incident that I don't even really recall. I felt like I was dying because of the lead in my system. I hadn't slept in three weeks, and when I came to, I was in big trouble."

During his time in prison, Rick earned his GED. He has continued with his therapy and meds, and just got back control of his own money and tools. While in Florida, he was involved in the Wounded Warrior project. He considers himself to be a perfectionist on the job, and is learning to handle other Habitat volunteers more delicately.

“I’ve done all this good stuff in my life, but when you look me up on the Internet, all that comes up is my arrest record. That isn’t me. This is me. I want my name ‘out there’ in a good way for others to see. I want to regain my reputation in this town.”