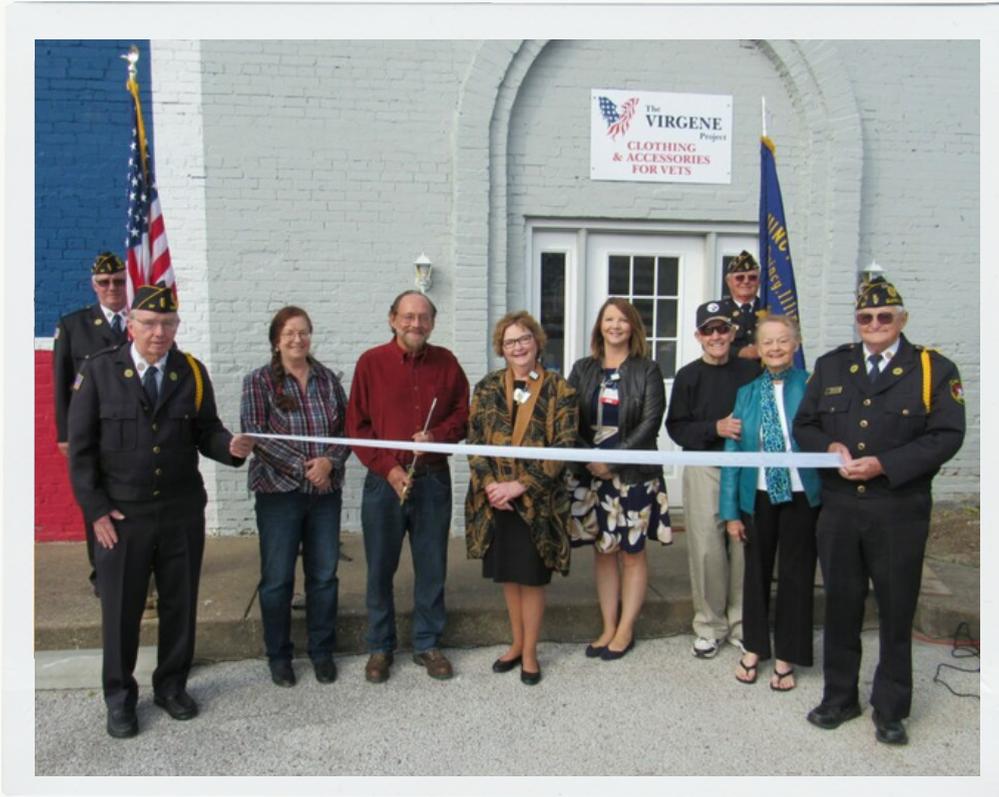




The Virgene Project

IN TRIBUTE TO 1ST LT. VIRGENE GILKERSON



Quincy Chamber of Commerce Ribbon Cutting Ceremony to celebrate the grand opening

This story was gifted by Amanda Erwin, Director of Grant Coordination at YWCA Quincy, and Tri-State Veterans Support, to celebrate and document the work of those that brought "The Virgene Project" to life and made this needed service a reality for the Veterans of the Quincy surrounding area.

Thank you to Jim and Sue Hobbins, Dave Tooke, Glenn Swick, and Blessing Reimann College of Nursing for sharing their stories, and the story of Virgene Gillkerson, the namesake and inspiration of this endeavor.

“ OUR MISSION IS THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM - THAT EVERY VETERAN IS SERVED, NOT ONLY WITH CLOTHES AND SHOES, BUT THAT THEIR BASIC NEEDS ARE MET. - SUE HOBBSINS

INTRODUCTION

To tell the story of The Virgene Project, is to tell the story of the people that brought it to life. This story begins by sharing the life stories of Jim and Sue Hobbins and how their first eight, and seven, decades of living, led to their meeting.

As you will read, they had both reached turning points in their lives where they felt something was missing, what was missing was each other. Later in their lives, they were both willing, and ready, to make big changes and take big risks to find fulfillment and renewed purpose.

Jim and Sue had both lived full lives with the usual responsibilities of work and family. With newfound freedom, they ventured into uncharted territory while still remaining true to their beliefs and callings to help others.

With the support of their church family, and each other, the idea of The Virgene Project was born. Working alongside their good friends, Dave and Charlotte Tooke, they took a simple concept of providing clothing to Veterans and turned it into a mission to create lasting change in the lives of Veterans and their community.

Central to this story is also Virgene Gilkerson. A friend, supporter, Veteran, and fellow church member, Virgene was the inspiration and legacy of their endeavor. Her memory lives on through her friends' service to the Veteran community of the Quincy surrounding area.

It Started with Jim

AS TOLD BY JIM

FAMILY BEGINNINGS

My dad was from England and had worked in coal mines. At the age of 14, children would work out on the slag heaps. They would separate out the coal from the slag. He worked out on the slag heaps from 14 to 15 years old.

He and his father came over to America on the last trip of the Lusitania before it sank. That was 1915. They started out in Detroit, Michigan, and Dad worked in the car industry. His father was killed in Detroit - run over by a streetcar. He, his mother, and two sisters, moved to Pennsylvania. That is where he met my mother. She was a French Huguenot; the first generation in this country.

Dad met Mom, sparks flew, and they got married. Nine months later they had their first child. They ended up with four girls, and then me, and my brother. I was born in 1926.

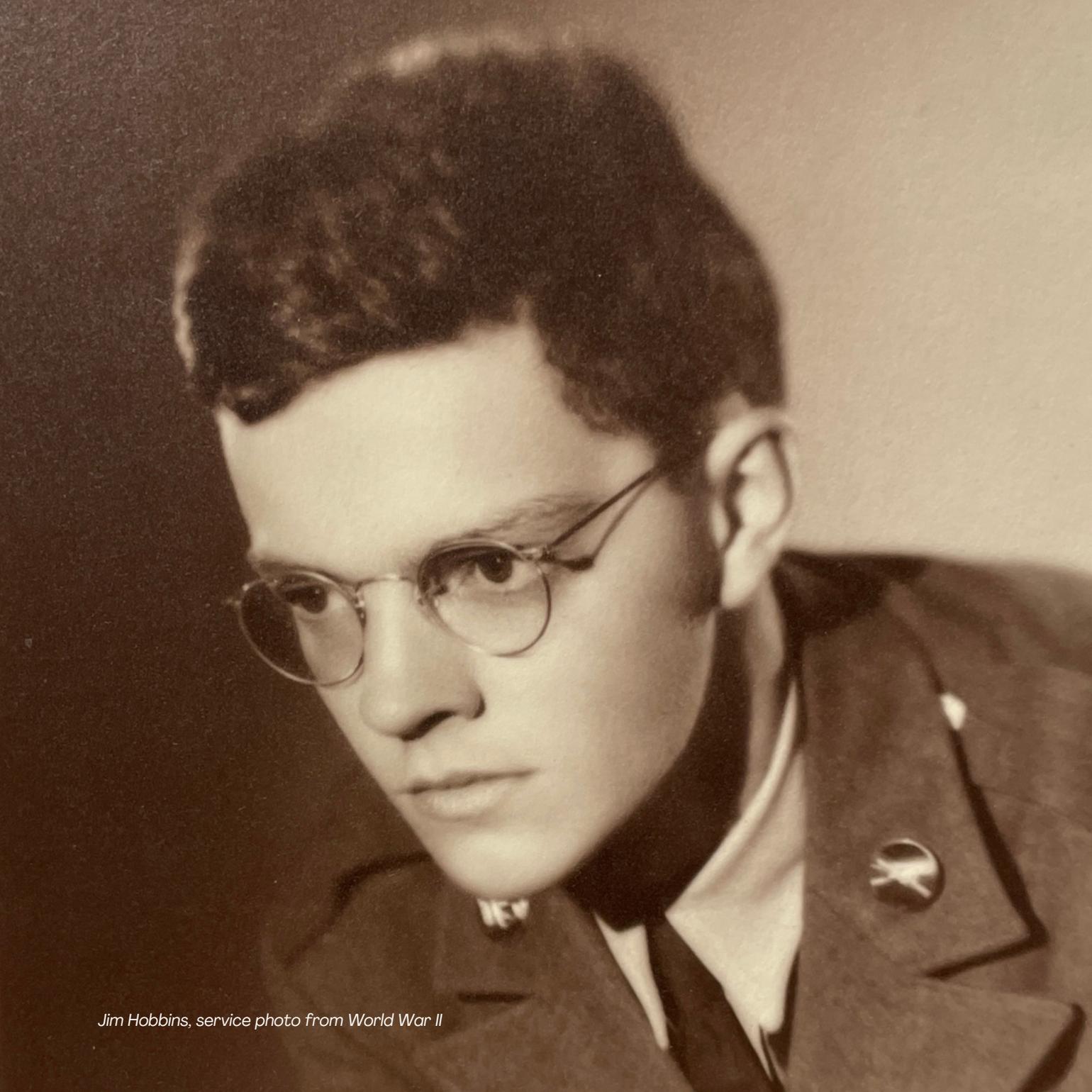
We didn't have a lot of money. We never owned a house, but we had enough money to survive. We thought we were lucky. No one ever complained about it, because you had to do what you had to do.

Dad began showing signs of Black Lung Disease in the 1930's. No one had a clue what to do about that. In his later years, he would go a year or two doing well and then his lungs would give him problems and he would have to stop working. We all worked to make money for the family. He died at the age of 56.

SERVING IN WORLD WAR II

In 1943, I left school. I was drafted in 1944 and came back in 1946. I was in the army and the 32nd Infantry Division. It was a collection of National Guard groups from Wisconsin and Michigan. That organization had been long standing for many years, and goes back to World War I.

The 32nd Infantry disbanded in 1946. I went to the Philippines and was there until the war ended. After the war ended. I went with occupation troops to Japan. When they finally disbanded, I knew I didn't want to sign up for anything; I wanted to go home. I said I would finish up my term in the Air Corp if I could. I went to work as an A & E Mechanic, working on the preflight checking.



Jim Hobbins, service photo from World War II

Jim's Story Continued

CAPTAIN BIGLEY

I met a very nice gentleman, Captain Bigley, and worked on his plane. He took a shine to me. I told him I wanted to learn how to fly, and he told me he could help me do that. He took me out on dry runs. A lot of traffic was coming from the Chinese mainland into Japan and vice versa. So, we were running patrols over the Sea of Japan.

He would take me up with him when he could. He had to have a reason for me to be on the plane, maybe an instrument needed to be checked or something. I got to fly a lot with him. When we got airborne, he would tell me what to do. I learned how to fly, but I never learned how to land. I flew it enough times that I really got comfortable with it.

Before I came home, I was transferred to a group that was servicing attack bombers that had much more powerful engines. My game plan was to come home and take formal classes because I wanted to become an aircraft designer.

RESPONSIBLE FROM AN EARLY AGE

When I got home, I went to Cornell. I was successful in all my testing except math. You can't have weak math when you are going to be an aircraft designer. That pretty much convinced me that was not going to happen.

I still thought I could be an air mechanic. I did a little of that while I was in school. Soon after, I got

married, foolishly, at 20 years old. I now was working for my immediate family, as well as helping Mom and Dad. I constantly found myself having to be responsible at an early age.

I am the only one of the children that ever went to college. To this day, I am the only person in my family that has gone to college, including my own children.

I got a job selling insurance and hated it. I finally found something I liked, merchandising and advertising, and that is what I have done most of my life.

My life may not be the best of lives, but it was a life that was honest. The biggest mistake I ever made was asking the mother of my children for a divorce, for all of the wrong reasons, and I will never forgive myself for that.

I am very fortunate that I found a lady, Pat, that I liked very much. She and I got married, and we spent over 40 years together. In 2010, she began developing signs that she might have dementia or Alzheimer's. She passed away in 2012.

When I retired, I felt somewhat fulfilled, but after Pat died, I had to get away from the house. I sold everything. I didn't want anything.

I met a lady online who had a resolution camp for people going through different problems in their lives. She told me what the cost was to do it and I told her I couldn't afford it. She said she could use someone to work for her. I went to Hawaii and worked for her for two years.

SOMETHING WAS MISSING

Over those two years of working in Hawaii I was moving lava rock and doing physical work all day. I would get up in the morning and work until the sun went down doing work for her. In the process I lost 40 pounds. I got my health back again.

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I WAS AWARE OF THE FREEDOM I HAD, BUT IT FELT LIKE SOMETHING WAS MISSING. I MET SUE QUITE BY ACCIDENT.

My daughter set up an online profile for me. I posted something about what I was doing, and Sue spotted it. She wrote to me and said, “You sound interesting. You just lost your wife, and I just lost my husband. It sounds like you are having an interesting time, would you mind if I lived vicariously through you?” We developed a good relationship talking with each other.

I called Sue one night, and I asked her if she wanted to come to Hawaii to visit. I was house sitting and had lodging she could share. She told me she was going to think about it and the next day she called and said she would.

That turned into me meeting her at the airport. My inner self said that I needed someone in my life.



Jim and Sue in Hawaii

I may not have thought I needed someone, but I did. I liked what she was. She was just there for a free vacation!

We loved to get into really strong arguments about how things are going in our lives. She said, “I like you because you are able to write a complete sentence. You know words that I have never heard before.

She made it very clear that she wouldn't have a long-term relationship without marriage. She talked me into that plan, so that's what we did. We got married in 2014, two years after we had both lost our previous spouses.

For about six months I thought she lived in a place called Quincy, Indiana. She said, “No turkey, it is Quincy, Illinois!” After we got married, we moved to Quincy.

Why I Met Jim

AS TOLD BY SUE



Sue Hobbins

Something I have always liked to do is get involved in other people's lives. I like to help where I can. When I was a teacher, I loved the kids I was working with, especially the kids with a couple strikes against them. I liked to see how I could help and fill in some of the gaps in their lives.

I'm a mother of three sons. My husband and I were very active in church because raising a family we didn't have lots of money. We had adequate money, but our thought was, you give time and all you can that way, when you can't drop a half a million here and several thousand there. So, that's what we did.

We were married 51 years. He died very suddenly. It was one of those things, one day we were laughing and having a good time and could come and go and the next day he was dead. His heart gave out after a surgery. I lost him ten years ago, on his birthday. It is not pleasant to go through anytime, but that does have something to do with how and why I met Jim.

Before meeting Jim, I got even more active in our church. I didn't want to be at home. Our poor dog suffered a lot though because she wanted me to be home! But it was just hard. I continued to live where we had been living. You don't want to be at home in a house by yourself all the time.

I was also looking for someone to talk to. I got involved in online dating. What I was really looking for was someone to go to coffee with and that sort of thing. I met several people, but it was not something that I wanted to keep going. Jim was older than me and lived in Ohio.

HOW SUE ENDED UP IN HAWAII

I started talking to Jim in October of 2013, on a Sunday. We had the same gospel lesson that day. That is kind of how we got started. We found out there were things we were both interested in. He is a Civil War buff, and I am interested in the Civil War. He said, "Oh, by the way, I am selling out and moving to Hawaii."

I told Jim. "I have never been to Hawaii, and I would love to go. Let me know what you are doing, and I will kind of live vicariously through you and the activities you are doing." I had no intention of actually meeting him. Man, I was so safe!

He called me in March and said, "This is Jim. I haven't sent you an email in about six weeks." I said, "Jim who?" Because I didn't recognize his voice. We had never spoken on the phone. We got about halfway through this long conversation we are having, and he said, "I have an idea. Why don't you come to Hawaii? I am house sitting right now and there is an extra bedroom. It has really helped me to get away from everything and do something different."

I said, "Well, I can't tell you right now, but I will call you back tomorrow." I thought about it, and about two minutes after I hung up, I thought, "I'm going to go." One of my kids said, "Whatever Mom, you are going to do whatever you want to do anyway!"

I thought, what the heck. I had never had that freedom in my life. I went to college, but I went home almost every weekend. I was engaged half the time I was in college. I never traveled without my family. I was married three days after I graduated college.

I always had to think about somebody else. A friend and I went on vacation about a year and a half after my husband had died. We went shopping and I thought, "I have money and I can do whatever I want." I never did that. It was kind of a relief. The other thing was, if I don't make it home some night, who cares? Who would know? That was kind of unnerving.

After I landed in Hawaii and Jim picked me up, we drove two hours back to where he was living. I don't think one of us closed our mouths the whole way. We just chatted away like we had known each other for years. We had chatted back and forth for nine months before we met in person, so that helped.

I went over to Hawaii on April 15 of 2014. We were married on the 16th of July in 2014. I was in Hawaii for three or four days and he proposed to me! What I really wanted was a companion. We seemed to be very compatible. I also did the dishes, that is probably why he married me!

My plan was always to come back from Hawaii. I really wanted to be around my family. Jim said, "That's fine because I don't have any place to go back to. We were going to stay until the end of the year in 2014. I wanted to spend Christmas in Hawaii."



One of Jim and Sue's adventures in Hawaii

An Idea from Ohio

AS TOLD BY JIM

MEETING HOMELESS VETERANS

I was very successful in the advertising business. I was Vice President of a large advertising agency in Ohio. When I finally quit my job, and I was still living in Mt. Vernon, Ohio, I was asked to do a project in finding answers as to what could be done for the homeless population.

We determined the size of the problem by taking a week of visiting the sites where the homeless lived. We tried to find the most information about the people to determine what should be done.

I became gradually aware that a good percentage of the people who were homeless were Veterans. I hadn't really thought about the Veteran situation in those terms. I knew there were needs, but I was naive enough to think that the VA could take care of most of those needs. I found out later that wasn't true.

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What were their needs? They needed money. I didn't have money. I could go out and raise money but giving money to those in need seemed to be a senseless experience. They didn't need money, they needed help. They needed help emotionally and physically. Some of them had horrible health issues.

There was one thing I could do: I knew how to hustle people to get things done. I went to my church and talked to my pastor, and I went to the college in the area and asked if I could go through the clothing that students left behind and I would donate them.

The first year I went through the clothing, washed everything, and then took the clothes to the Veterans. I knew I couldn't keep doing that. I had heard of a place in Columbus that gave clothing away to Veterans. I went and talked to them and asked if I provided them the clothing I collected if they would give me clothing for Veterans when I needed it. They agreed.

I started that system and was doing pretty well, but I wasn't happy with the clothing I was getting. That is when I had the dream of having my own shop.

WHEN WE MOVED TO QUINCY, I THOUGHT, WHAT IF I OPEN A VETERAN'S STORE HERE?

The Beginning

AS TOLD BY SUE

There were two things that helped start The Virgene Project: Jim had been very active in his church, and it was difficult coming here knowing no one but me. Although it wasn't hard for him to meet people, I wanted him to have something that was his.

He kept gathering clothes and donating them. He kept talking about that. I said, "You know Jim, I don't think there is anything like that here. We have the Salvation Army and thrift stores, but there is no clothing give away, or anything specific for Veterans, that I am aware of. I think maybe you need to talk to some people around town and get acquainted with them and do something here."

We started this project along with our friends, Dave and Charlotte Tooke. Our friend, Dave, is a 20-year Veteran of the Air Force, so he and Jim spoke the same language. At first, we called it, "Vets for Vets," as it is Veterans helping Veterans, as Jim and Dave were both Veterans.

That first year, the majority of the clothes came from Christ Lutheran Church. We just put a big cardboard box out and made an announcement that we were taking clothing. We were getting lots of nice name brand clothes in condition that I would be wearing, not giving it away.



Dave and Charlotte Tooke with Jim

There were enough people cleaning out their closets and buying new things. My jaw just kept dropping when we went through those clothes. We had a fairly good-sized dining room and living room in the house we were in then, and we just set up tables to size things and put them into piles and boxes.

The second year our pastor said, "Would you like me to send an email out to all of my contacts in the ministerial association to get other churches involved?" Then clothes started pouring in. We found we were getting a little overburdened. We started getting calls from widows who would like their spouses' clothing to go to Veterans.

The Beginning Continued

Jim said, "I looked around and there wasn't anything like I envisioned for Veterans in Quincy. There were organizations that gave clothing away, but it wasn't focused on Veterans."

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I WANTED A PLACE THAT WAS ISOLATED JUST FOR VETERANS.

Dave Tooke shared how he has been involved since the beginning, "I got involved with The Virgene Project when Jim and Sue started it with the one-day event at the Senior Center. We started this on Veterans Day. We did this for two years.

Jim continued, "The first two years we didn't have a store, we used one of the rooms at the Quincy Senior Center. We had so much clothing in our house that I told Sue, "Either the clothes or me are going to need to go at some point!"

"We knew that wasn't working. We had a conversation with a real estate broker, Glenn Swick. I told him, 'I just need to find a place that has some space.' He got back to me about a few weeks later and said, 'Why don't you use my back room.'"

Glenn Swick elaborated, "I was introduced to Jim and Sue Hobbins in 2017 when we were all part of the recently organized Veterans Referral Initiative, whose purpose was to bring together the local and state organizations that provide service and assistance to local Veteran needs in the Tri-state



Dave Tooke with Jim and Virgene's Son, Paul

area. The group was facilitated by the United Way of Adams County. United Way had been working with me since 2012 as the fiscal sponsor for the Tri-State Warrior Outreach and we were trying to avoid duplication of services by combining the strengths of all the local groups & organizations assisting Veterans unmet needs at that time to be more effective. In those days Jim and Sue were operating out of their own home under the name "Vets for Vets."

"Jim approached me when he learned I am a real estate broker and explained their vision for a Veteran's clothing store, asking me if I'd keep my eye out for any possible properties they might be able to use as a courtesy, or at least very inexpensively, since they were funding the project out of their own pocket.

"After Jim explained their concept, I thought it was a great idea and would be a good fit downtown, so

The Beginning Continued

for a few weeks I made some calls to local property owners, but none were interested in giving up any space free or at a discount. I had some storage space in the building my office is located in and offered it to Jim and Sue at no cost as long as they wanted to use it for their Veteran's store."

BUILT BY VETERANS

Dave reflected, "We started out gathering clothing from members of the church and we were loaded with clothes. The next thing you know, we ended up here. What was really nice about the situation was that the Home Depot volunteered their time and materials to build our space."

Jim added, "I went to Home Depot, as I know they are very helpful with Veterans. I talked to Gary at

Home Depot, and he said he could bring a group of our employees and clean the place, do the lighting and whatever else needs to be done.

"We received support from Virgene's family, our church, individuals, and other groups have helped to bring funds in to run the store. No one receives a paycheck who works here - we all volunteer our time."

Glenn said, "A nice surprise was when Quincy's Home Depot stepped in to renovate the space they were to use for their store at no cost-it was a great example of local businesses and volunteers working together to provide for our local area Veterans in need. I believe all or most of the Home Depot employees that volunteered to work on it were also Veterans."



Home Depot bringing in supplies to convert Glenn's extra room into The Virgene Project's store.



Home Depot Employees/Veterans donating their time and materials to build The Virgene Project store area.

Store to help veterans

VIRGENE PROJECT: Efforts were aided by support from the Quincy Senior and Family Resource Center

By **STEVE EIGHINGER**

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QUINCY — Jim Hobbins' ongoing mission is simple in theory, impactful by nature.

Hobbins, a 92-year-old World War II veteran, coordinates the Virgene Project, which in layman's terms is "veterans helping veterans."

Hobbins and his wife, Sue, have long been assisting veterans in need in various forms, and come Tuesday, Oct. 15, another part of their vision becomes a reality. That's when their Virgene Project opens a site to provide additional assistance to veterans who may be homeless or requiring aid.

The Virgene Project is opening a veterans-only store at 812 Hampshire, right next to Swick Realty. The store is volunteer

based and came to life thanks to help from Swick Realty and Home Depot, said Hobbins.

The store is open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays, and/or by appointment.

"We've been assisting veterans for 10 years," Hobbins said. "It's a labor of love. There is no charge for anything. It is all for veterans in need."

In recent years, Hobbins' efforts were aided by support from the Quincy Senior and Family Resource Center. Hobbins, a native of Pittsburgh, has lived in Quincy for five years.

Hobbins was a part of U.S. Army forces 1944-46, serving in the Philippines and then as part of the Allied occupation of Japan at the end of World War II. Admittedly, he has always had a passion for helping veterans.

"We want to let them know there is some-

one out there working on their behalf," Hobbins said.

While the Virgene Project is designed to primarily help veterans with clothing, Hobbins hopes to eventually be able to assist veterans find other resources.

Hobbins also wants veterans in need to know there is no red tape involved when they come to the Virgene Project for help.

"When they come through that door, they're with us and we are with them ... we'll help them out," Hobbins said.

The Virgene Project is named for the late Virgene Gilkerson, who served in World War II as a nurse. Gilkerson, who was a longtime Quincy area resident, died at age 92 in 2014.

Contact Hobbins at 217-257-0707 or email shobbins@adams.net.

Article printed in the Herald-Whig to announce the opening of the store location.

Virgene



1st Lt. Virgene Gilkerson, New Guinea, 1944

The Virgene Project is named after Virgene Gilkerson. Virgene was born in Camp Point, Illinois, and was a longtime resident of Quincy, Illinois.

Virgene served as a nurse in the Pacific during World War II. A friend of Jim and Sue Hobbins, and Dave and Charlotte Tooke, she often shared with them her many wartime memories.

A devoted supporter, and representative, of the Veteran community, it seemed appropriate to everyone that The Virgene Project keep her memory alive and pay tribute to her service to the country, her church community, and the overall community of Quincy.

Fittingly, Virgene passed away on Veterans Day, November 11th, 2014, at the age of 92.

Virgene Continued

A VETERAN'S VETERAN

Sue shared, "After Virgene's husband died, she and I started going to plays and doing things together. I got to know her really well. She was a hoot. She was up for anything. She told us many stories about when she was in the service.

"She was a Veteran's Veteran. She had been on the honor flight. She was active in anything having to do with Veterans. If there was a parade, she was on the Veteran's float, she was very active in the Red Cross, and anything else she could do. Virgene died in 2014 on Veteran's Day. I thought that was appropriate."

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VIRGENE TOLD JIM, "IT WAS SOLDIERS LIKE YOU THAT I WOULD TAKE CARE OF."

THE MATRIARCH

Dave remembered, "My wife Char and I knew Virgene from the start when we joined Christ Lutheran Church. She was one heck of a character.

"She told us what she did during World War II in her role as a nurse in New Guinea. One funny story she shared about her time in New Guinea was the fact that she washed her hair with beer! Their base was

right next to the ocean and all they had was salt water. She was like the matriarch of our church. Everyone loved her."

When asked what Virgene would think about this if she were still alive, Dave said, "She would be here."

Jim said, "I called her children and said that I wanted to open a store for Veterans clothing and asked them if they would mind if I used her name for the store. They said, 'Mom would have appreciated that.'"



Photo provided by Blessing Health Professions Library at Blessing Health System

Nurse didn't realize she'd signed up for the military

By MELISSA DeVERGER

Virgene wrote a message to her father in a letter she sent home from her station in New Guinea during World War II, "You can have a jeep after the war if you want one, but when I come home I desire to ride in a car with soft seats, balloon tires and on the pavement."

Margaret Virgene Ward was born March 22, 1922, in Camp Point. She graduated from Central High School and enrolled in Blessing Hospital School for Nurses on a dare from her fellow classmates.

She was nicknamed "One Week Ward" because she kept a packed suitcase in her room intending to only stay one more week. She continued with the program and graduated in September 1943.

Many nursing students, including Ward, signed up for the Red Cross Student Nurse Reserve, mostly helping with first-aid training.

Ward had a date waiting for her and neglected to read the contract carefully, missing the sentence, "I will accept military service."

In November 1943 she received a letter from President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordering her to report for duty.

She reported for her physical at Camp Ellis in McDonough County. Next she reported to Camp McCoy near La Crosse, Wis., in Dec. 28, 1943, for six weeks of basic training. During her training she

participated in endurance training, learned how to tell military time, how to purify water and how to prepare for a gas attack, while also working at the base hospital. She was given the rank of second lieutenant and received her uniforms at the camp.

Ward's next stop was Fort Riley in Kansas, where the 54th General Hospital trained as a unit. Without notice, the unit's members were ordered on a troop train, finding themselves in San Francisco when they disembarked.

The nurses were given typhus and cholera shots, additional uniforms, field gear and a physical that mostly consisted of a lice check. After five days in California, they boarded the SS Lurline, headed for New Guinea at Milne Bay.

The SS Lurline was a cruise liner refitted as a troop ship, with cabins built for two now housing 15 women in three layers of bunks. The troops were allowed on deck only twice a day for 15 minutes each time because of the overcrowding. Ward's unit made its way to Fort Moresby and eventually to Hollandia to set up a general hospital in New Guinea.

She remembered staying in large grass huts with about 40 nurses, their belongings tucked under mosquito nets. Every night before bed they would use "a flashlight and a hammer, or whatever, or a boot, or whatever you could find, and you check



Virgene Ward stands in front of a Jeep in a 1944 photo taken in Hollandia, New Guinea. | Photo courtesy of Blessing Health System Archives

around to make sure there wasn't any varmints in there before you tucked the mosquito net down," according to an interview.

The 54th General Hospital, where Ward arrived in October 1944, was a secret hospital built for casualties from the invasion of the Philippines. Temperatures in New Guinea could reach 120 degrees, and fresh food was scarce, usually only eaten on holidays. The nurses lived on peanut butter and orange marmalade. Ward recalled one point when it rained for 52 consecutive days, causing mold to grow in hair. The

hospital wards had tin roofs, cement floors, and studs with tarpaper nailed on them for walls. The nurses worked 12-hour shifts in a ward that had 40 beds. The nurses were always accompanied by a guard with a gun when off-duty, mostly for the snakes.

In May 1945 Ward was promoted to first lieutenant and received "battle credit" for participation in the New Guinea campaign. In July she accompanied patients back to the United States, with World War II ending while she was en route. Ward celebrated the

ABOUT HSQAC

The Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving local history. This column is written by members of the society and features items in its collection. For information visit hsqac.org or call 217-222-1835.

end of the war with friends in San Francisco, recalling the city as "the wildest place you ever saw. Nothing opened. You couldn't get - there was no place to go eat, except on the base, because everything was shut down." After the celebration she reported to Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco's Presidio. She was relieved from active duty effective Oct. 24, 1945, returning to Camp Point after working in Arizona.

Ward enrolled in Washington University but had to wait until the fall of 1946 to attend. During this time, she met William Gilkerson, marrying him in December 1945. They raised two children.

About 1955, Virgene started working in the nursing department for Blessing Hospital, retiring in 1984 after 29 years of service. Her dedication was recognized throughout her career, and in 2001 she received the Nurse of the Year award from the Blessing Alumni Association. Virgene also continued to volunteer for the Red Cross, receiving her pin for 70 years of volunteering in 2013.

In 2000, tragedy struck the Gilkerson family when Virgene and her husband, William, were struck by a

car at 14th and Maine as they were leaving a concert at Quincy Junior High School. William died from his injuries, and Virgene was airlifted to Peoria in critical condition. At 78 years old, she wasn't expected to live from her massive injuries, including "multiple brain hemorrhages, broken ribs, tears in her aorta and renal artery, and multiple contusions."

Virgene remained in a coma for over a month, with doctors suggesting her family find a nursing home for her. After speaking with Dr. Jumonville, the family moved her to Blessing Hospital's Skilled Nursing Unit, where she made a remarkable recovery, spending 31 days in the unit and 10 more days at Blessing's Rehabilitation Unit. Virgene went home Dec. 27, 2000, and a month later was back to volunteering at Red Cross blood drives.

Virgene lived a full life, dying at age of 92 on Nov. 11, 2014. She is buried in Greenmont Cemetery in Quincy. Virgene is fondly remembered for her service to the Red Cross and her unbreakable spirit.

Melissa DeVerger is a librarian and a Quincy native with an interest in history.

Virgene's Christmas Tree

AS SHARED AT THE STORE DISPLAY

Military life is tough enough, but the holidays, especially Christmas time, can make it tougher.

Lieutenant M. Virgene Ward was serving as a nurse at the secret 54th General Hospital in New Guinea during WWII when Christmas rolled around.

Living conditions were difficult: grass hut shelters, bad food, insects, and miserable heat. Nothing Christmas-like at all was to be found.

Never one to sit and complain, Virgene was instead a believer in taking action. Gathering together some pipe-cleaners and seed pods, Virgene fashioned her own Christmas tree, atop a foil-covered salt-shaker stand, to cheer herself and her comrades-in-arms.

Years later, that Christmas Tree of Hope continues to serve as a reminder that we can all work to brighten our lives and the lives of others, following Virgene's example.



Virgene's wartime Christmas tree, displayed at The Virgene Project store.



*Virgine's uniform on display at Blessing Riemann
College of Nursing*

The Mission

FINDING THE NEED

Jim shared, "Some Veterans came back mentally wounded and weren't ready to enter the workforce. Some were looking for work and couldn't find it. Having families, no money, and being emotionally wounded all contributed to where they ended up. They wanted to be doing things to better themselves, but they had been dealt a bad hand and unfortunately some give up."

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OUR MISSION IS TO FIND EVERY VETERAN THAT HAS A CLOTHING NEED, OR ANY NEED.

"When they come through our door, they are in a different world. They are in a world where no one is challenging them or asking them to prove anything. We don't have a limit of what we give. There is more than enough clothing to satisfy everyone's needs. I try to convince Veterans to bring their family in to get clothing."

"One Veteran came in and looked around the store and then asked if we had any suits. I asked if he was looking for a job and he said, 'No, I just want a suit to be buried in.'

"Another person came in and he sat down and said, 'I don't really need any clothes, I just need someone to talk to.' Sue said, 'You have got me. Let's start talking.'"

MEETING THE NEED

Dave said, "The mission is to take care of all vets, and even their spouses and older children in need of clothing. It doesn't matter if they do or do not have a home; we don't care about their income. It is about meeting their needs and taking care of our brothers and sisters.

"Veterans are a proud people. They don't always want handouts. They want to be left alone, especially those that have been in combat. Somewhere along the line, they may need something. Maybe they only come in one time for a nice pair of jeans, or a warm coat. The store is well worth it to make people aware that Veterans are in need. We know there are more Veterans out there."

The Mission Continued

Glenn said, "To me, I feel their mission is to let other Veterans know they are appreciated, wanted, and that they are truly cared for by a lot of people in our community. The volunteers at the Virgene Project feel it's their job to be part of the local face of that in their own small way."

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BY PROVIDING THEIR CLIENTS WITH CLOTHING, SHOES, HYGIENE PRODUCTS, A CUP OF COFFEE AND SOME GOOD CONVERSATION, I THINK THEY ARE DELIVERING ON THAT MISSION 110%.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Sue added, "Not all Veterans need clothing. This isn't based on need. This is based on whether you are a Veteran or married to a Veteran. It is about giving back to Veterans however we can."

"We have a woman who comes in with her son who is a Veteran. We don't serve children per say, but if you are a Veteran with a teenager, we can help them. If the Veteran is coming in for help, the rest of the family needs help too."

"Sometimes, Jim will take someone over to the Salvation Army and tell them that the Veteran is out of food today, can they help them out? And they will leave with a box of food."

"We will open up the store outside of our normal business hours if someone says they have some things they need, or they will be in town at a time when we aren't open, we will come in to open up the store to give them things or to accept a donation."

"We are available almost 24/7. I have been called when I am on vacation, and I can make a phone call if people need help. They can always get a hold of me."

"We don't want to see anyone homeless, but certainly not Veterans. These people have put their lives on the line, even if they weren't in combat."

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OUR MISSION IS THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM - THAT EVERY VETERAN IS SERVED, NOT ONLY WITH CLOTHES AND SHOES, BUT THAT THEIR BASIC NEEDS ARE MET.

"And yet, why do they not have a place to live? Why don't they have a job? Why don't they have clothes? We started out thinking about very basic needs and homelessness, but there are a lot of people who aren't homeless that still need a lot of help."

The Big Picture

MORE THAN JUST CLOTHES

Sue shared, "Sometimes it is a cup of coffee and just sitting and talking - we do that. We have become more than clothes to people. I'm not a counselor; Jim keeps calling me the mother, everyone's mother.

"Whatever it is that people tell me, I want them to know that I remember. If people have been here more than once or twice, I usually can call them by their first name. During the cold weather I will have coffee and I like to have cookies for them too."

Jim added, "When I asked Sue to be the Store Manager it touched a chord in her. She treats everyone that walks through the door as her son or daughter. Someone will sit in a chair here and tell her the stories of their life. This is real stuff. We are not playing games here.

"I will sit here for the whole day and if I have one Veteran come through the door, my mission is accomplished. And Sue feels the same way about that.

"Sue is a powerful lady, very honest and real - what you see is what you get. The luckiest day of my life was when I found her at a time in my life when I didn't know what I was going to do with my life."



Sue and Jim



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I WILL SIT HERE FOR THE WHOLE DAY AND IF I HAVE ONE VETERAN COME THROUGH THE DOOR, MY MISSION IS ACCOMPLISHED.

-JIM HOBBS



Life Storyteller, Maureen Klues