



A volunteer scrapes paint off of the exterior of a historical home in Washington on Oct. 28.

Story by Sean Finnerty | Photos by Molly Mathis

**A**nyone who has driven northbound on U.S. 17 into Washington, North Carolina, or “Little Washington” as it’s affectionately called, is familiar with the image.

Crossing over the Pamlico River, a picturesque view of the town’s waterfront area emerges.

Old meets new, as the waterfront is lined with an out-of-use flour mill, as well as red-brick condominiums designed to fit in with the quaint, historic look central to the town’s image. Restaurants with patio decks face the water, and a boardwalk runs along the river, attracting locals and tourists alike.

Then, there is the calm river water reflecting the images of the buildings like a mirror.

The beauty of that view is what caught out-of-towner Robert Sands’ eye and led him to base his nonprofit organization, the Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities (PRISC), in Washington to both assist veterans and help preserve the town’s historic district.

Sands, an anthropologist and professor in Norwich University’s graduate and continuing studies department, has more than 25 years of work in areas like archaeology, cultural resource management and historical preservation. The 60-year-old also has worked with the Department of Defense since 2008, helping build language and culture programs to aid the Air Force’s deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. It was, in fact, his work

with the Department of Defense that brought him through Washington.

“I had to go down to Charleston, South Carolina, to present at the Charleston Air Force Base. So, Allison, my wife, and I drove back up the coast and spent a couple of days driving from Charleston to Alexandria,” Sands said. “The last place we stopped before we got on the (Interstate) 95 to come back was Washington. We went over (U.S.) 17 and the old bridge. When you come over that bridge from the south, you get that really cool view of the waterfront.”

Sands and his wife decided to stop in Washington before heading home, and they quickly fell in love with the town after checking out its historic district.



Volunteers work on the exterior of historical home in Washington for the Rose Haven project by the Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities on Oct. 28.

The couple made several return trips to the quaint town on the Pamlico River and finally in August 2016 bought a house there. They've now made it their home.

It was the home purchase, as well as the historic district and local community, that helped Sands make the final decision to base the Pamlico Rose Institute, which he had been thinking about starting for a couple of years, in Washington.

The Institute, of which Sands is chief executive officer, was started as a nonprofit organization in November of last year. Its stated mission is to help build and grow community through preserving history.

PRISC seeks to accomplish this mission through its umbrella program, the Betty Ann Sands Memorial Project Build

What we're trying to do is capture the sense of that common identity of being a past military person, and then providing those four or five homes in an enclave to veterans who've gone through similar experiences.

Community, named in honor of Sands' mother, who died two years ago. His mother is not only the namesake of one of the Institute's major programs but also its inspiration.

"She was what I would call a 'quiet activist,'" Sands said. "She was very active in her community. She was an environmentalist; she enjoyed her son being an anthropologist."

Not only was Sands' mother the inspiration for PRISC, she also, in a sense, funded it.

Sands used his portion of the inheritance he and his siblings received after their mother's death to establish the Institute. But that money alone isn't enough to completely fund PRISC. To



Robert Sands, founder of the Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities, works on the exterior of a home in Washington on Oct. 28.



Patty Franz, volunteer, scrapes paint from an old board on Oct. 28.

find donors, Sands has utilized social media to get the word out, and he also speaks with community groups about the project's mission.

With all the work Sands has done with the Department of Defense and military personnel, veterans hold a special place in his heart. This is reflected by two of PRISC's projects: Historical Enclaves and Rose Haven.

Historical Enclaves is intended for the benefit of disabled veterans. Its aim is to fix up failing houses in Washington's historic district so disabled military veterans and their families can live in them. The idea is to have veterans live near one another to form a distinct yet still connected community within the community.

"What we're trying to do is capture the sense of that common identity of being a past military person, and then providing those four or five homes in an enclave to veterans who've gone through similar experiences," Sands said. "In some ways that may help them better reintegrate into the community if they're actually living near, or next to, or around other veterans who happen to have the similar kinds of things that they're going through."

Meanwhile, the goal of the Rose Haven project is to acquire an endangered historical property to provide a safe and sober living experience for female veterans recovering from substance abuse, which often stems from coping with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, military sexual trauma or other forms of military-related trauma.

On June 1, PRISC purchased a house for the Rose Haven project and has been rehabilitating the property with the aim to open it in 2018.

Work to restore the home largely is being completed by volunteers on designated workdays. So far, volunteers have gutted the interior and cleared overgrown vegetation from the exterior.

Since the house has been vacant for many years, there is much renovation to be done. Greg Smith, a volunteer worker for PRISC, describes it as a ground-up renovation project.

"We've gone in and removed all the stucco from the walls and ceilings in the upstairs and downstairs, removed all the cabinetry in the

kitchen area,” Smith said. “We are in the process of stripping the paint on the exterior. I’ve gone and pressure washed some of the brickwork on the exterior.

“Soon, hopefully, we will be ready to start painting the porch area of the exterior, but there is some siding that needs to be replaced and then we’ll start to work on the inside,” he said.

It might be cheaper and easier to purchase and renovate houses that aren’t run-down and in the historic district, but Sands points out that historic preservation is half of PRISC’s mission. He said rehabilitating and repurposing houses in the historic district has several benefits for the community.

“One is economic, in terms of upgrading failing or vacant homes,” he said. “The second one is once we start going in and upgrading homes and stopping them from falling apart, then we also see to security issues that might be in the



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district because of what the empty or vacant homes would serve. We create a more shared identity within the historic district because it becomes a better place to live.”

In setting up the Institute and acquiring the homes it needs, Sands has worked with Emily Rebert, the community development planner for the City of Washington. Rebert originally was on the board of directors for PRISC but stepped down after several city council members expressed that it might be a conflict of interest.

Since she’s been involved from nearly the beginning of PRISC, Rebert knows about the obstacle it faced early on in acquiring its status as a nonprofit organization.

“Their 501(c)(3) got held up because the government wanted to make sure they weren’t just flipping houses and making a profit,” Rebert said. “They had to go into a bit more explanation as to what they’re doing. No one is making money off of it at all.”

Once PRISC showed that the goal was to both help veterans and fix up houses in the historic district, it received its nonprofit status. And while the Institute works to restore historic homes and provide for veterans, Rebert points to other benefits as well.

“Sixty to 70 percent of investments into working on a historic home is working with carpenters, working with craftsmen to rebuild these (houses),” Rebert said. “So, 60 to 70 percent of your expenditures are going right back into the neighborhood by creating jobs and hiring people in the trades to rehab these homes.”

The rehabilitated homes add to cultural heritage and tourism, on which Washington thrives, she said.

Rebert needed just two words to describe PRISC’s efforts and the passion of the man behind it: “It’s inspiring.”