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DINE 419

Local effort helping homeless veterans know they matter

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In the years following his discharge from the U.S. Army, Gregory Johnson's life turned into a war zone of its own.

Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Johnson, 27, did his best to integrate back into his life in Toledo after serving 2006-09. However, he encountered one devastating setback after another: He lost his job, his marriage crumbled, his three children were placed into foster care, he was shot and robbed, he was in an accident, his house was condemned and he was suddenly homeless.

Johnson's days were filled with tears and extreme apathy, not wanting to work, and not really able to due to his mental state.

"At one point, I was so depressed I tried to commit suicide, because I couldn't be around my kids," Johnson said. "I wanted to do it, but I didn't. Instead, I reached out to the veterans suicide line."



Veterans Matter Founder Ken Leslie, left, with Veteran Gregory Johnson at Johnson's home in Toledo. Toledo Free Press Photo by Christie Materni

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Desperately needing a place to stay,

Johnson had no money and depended on food stamps to live. It was then that he turned to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), where he was connected with Veterans Matter, a national charity founded and still based in the Glass City. Ken Leslie, of Toledo, started the group in 2012 with a simple mission: Help house homeless veterans.

"I really didn't want anyone knowing I was homeless," Johnson said. "If it wasn't for Ken and Veterans Matter reaching out to me, I don't know what I'd do."

Dine 419, a new weeklong restaurant fundraising event taking place Feb. 23-March 1, will provide assistance to Veterans Matter. Several area restaurants are participating in the event, with a portion of their proceeds going to help veterans like Johnson.

Veterans Matter

Today there are nearly 50,000 homeless veterans nationwide, many of whom qualify for voucher-assisted living provided by the U.S. government. However, they often lack the initial rental deposits

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necessary to secure their housing. Veterans Matters steps in to raise money and work directly with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the VA to ensure funds go straight to landlords for the vets in need.

Veterans Matter has dramatically accelerated the time it takes to help homeless veterans.

“Prior to Veterans Matter, in Lucas County, it took us 137 days from the time that we admitted a veteran into VA-supported housing to the time that we were able to lease the veteran up in his/her apartment/house,” said Shawn Dowling, a coordinator for VA Healthcare for Homeless Veterans.

“Today it takes us an average of 34 days. Having quick and easy access to deposits allows us to secure these funds in approximately 10 minutes. If we did not have Veterans Matter, we would need to take veterans around to different organizations where they would fill out applications for review, which can take up to 14 business days.”

Veterans Matter connects local communities, foundations, corporations and veterans groups with HUD and VA to move homeless vets off the streets and into permanent, supported housing. Once housed, services are lined up to help veterans and their families recapture their lives and return to domestic autonomy.

“I do street level outreach with a group of homeless advocates in Toledo — this is how I met Ken,” Dowling said. “Ken created Veterans Matter after a conversation that we had in respect to the needs of homeless veterans in Northwest Ohio.”

ProMedica, celebrity help

Leslie obtained initial support from musician John Mellencamp during a 2007 concert stop in Toledo. Mellencamp visited Leslie's Tent City, which raises awareness of homelessness and helps connect those in need with services. The event first took place in 1990 in Downtown Toledo.

Word of mouth spread to others in the music and entertainment industry. By the time he founded Veterans Matter, Leslie had connections with celebrities and their financial support, including Susan Sarandon, Katy Perry, Kid Rock, Ice-T, Stevie Nicks and Willie Nelson, among others.

“John [Mellencamp] talked about us on the stage, and said that [homelessness] really does matter,” Leslie said. “As far as the other celebrities, they keep hearing about it. People all over the country are supporting it because we do it well, and we do it fast.”

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Locally, ProMedica helped kick-start Veterans Matter by donating \$26,000 to Leslie's group in 2012, and giving 35 local landlords \$750 each to house local veterans. Since then, ProMedica has given further funding totaling near \$50,000, all for the Toledo Community Foundation's ProMedica Advocacy Fund.

“Part of what we believe we're called to do is to ensure we're meeting the social needs of our community,” said Barb Petee, ProMedica chief advocacy and government relations officer. “When Ken Leslie approached me about the difficulties that veterans are facing, it goes hand-in-hand with those food, clothing and shelter needs. It really was a community collaboration. It has grown far beyond Toledo, and has given awareness to the issue.”

Leslie originally started Veterans Matter because he saw a small local problem that left veterans with nowhere to live.

He quickly discovered that the small problem in Toledo was truly a national problem, and chapters have

since started all over America.

ProMedica considers Veterans Matter to be a perfect fit with the community and moral issues it supports.

"We really want to be supportive, so they can be productive citizens in our community, and focus on wellness issues," Petee said. "It makes sense from a moral standpoint, and from a community standpoint, and from a health industry standpoint, to help individuals address their needs."

Leslie believes the concept works because it's straightforward.

"It's so simple," Leslie said. "It's like everything else in life: If you're doing something good, people want to help. Dine 419 is a perfect example of this, because everybody knows exactly what the money does."

More than a home

While Johnson is only permitted to see his three children for one hour per week, he believes that having his own home improves the odds of those visitation hours increasing. His children's two mothers are not as fortunate.

"I am the only one out of the three parents who has a place of my own," Johnson said. "The others are staying either with family members or friends. Since I have my own place, that helps me out."

Veterans Matter made Johnson's dream come true when he moved into his home near the Old West End along Bancroft Street in August 2014.

"When I met Ken, I told him, 'I wanted to thank you face to face, because I didn't have the money,'" Johnson said. "Now I can do whatever I want because it's my house. [Leslie's] been there as a mentor and a friend. The only thing he asks is that I pay it forward."

Paying it forward

Johnson is hoping to pay it through education and music. He has already started some course work at University of Toledo, but plans to transfer to Florida A&M later this year, into the same program that once educated former Scott High School band director Gus Walker.

"I want to bring the history and tradition and style back to Scott, the way it used to be," Johnson said. "I want to come back to Toledo and be the band director, because it gave me an outlet when I was younger. It gave me a sense of pride and direction. I want to stop [the kids] before they get to the street gangs, and give back to the kids. And I want to incorporate that discipline from when I was in the military."

Johnson loved serving in the military, and was stationed in Germany and Iraq, but also visited places about which most only dream: Czech Republic, Italy, France and even sister city Toledo, Spain.

Although Johnson believes he's headed in the right direction, he still has his struggles, such as needing a reliable car for his on-again, off-again factory job in Bowling Green. Yet, despite his trials, he's thankful for everything.

"I want to help as much as I can," Johnson said. "I want to break that generational curse for my kids and create something positive. I give God the glory, the honor and the praise. And, I don't complain."

For more information, visit veteransmatter.org and dine419.org.



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