

Vets for Vets Looking to Expand, Continue Reaching Out in New Year

By Kelly Chandler
Staff Reporter

Jake Leone does not have your everyday, run-of-the mill list of goals for 2015. No, the staff sergeant has bigger aspirations for the organization now in its second year of “helping military veterans help themselves.”

Leone, founder and administrator of Vets for Vets (VFV) of Pennsburg, may have a lot on his plate, but you will be hard-pressed to find someone with more determination or more passion for serving those who served their country.

“I believe and maintain 100 percent committed to serving our veteran community,” Leone said. “There’s still a lot of work to be done.”

In the coming year, Vets for Vets will be looking to establish a shuttle service to connect local veterans with Veterans Affairs (VA) service providers. Leone is also hoping to open up the doors of VFV’s Pennsburg transitional home to a small family and possibly a female veteran. He says more small- and large-scale service projects will also be on tap in and around the Upper Perkiomen Valley.

But you can’t look forward without taking a look at all that

2014 had in store for the organization.

As Leone underwent six months of training at Goodfellow Air Force Base in Texas for the Air National Guard, and was honored with his class’ outstanding contributor award there, things at the Pennsburg transitional home didn’t slow down. Two participants moved on and out, one with a college degree and the other who is slated to be married this spring.

More veterans moved in to the house. Some eventually had to be referred to more specialized programs, but others, like Kyle Fairchild, have flourished. Vets for Vets, which stresses the development of life skills and facilitates educational and employment opportunities, has helped him get back on his feet. He was homeless for a short time.

“On a personal and organizational level I would say he’s been a blessing for us,” Leone said. “He is somebody that has honor and integrity. Opening the door to him, he does anything and everything that we ask of him. Always yes sir, no sir. He represents himself with the utmost dignity and respect.”

Fairchild is now a sophomore at Montgomery County Community College with a 4.0 GPA. He



Bob Esposito / Town and Country

Members of the Vets for Vets organization, left to right, Kyle Fairchild, veteran and house manager, Jake Leone, founder, and Nick Degiglio, board member, inside the 4th Street, Pennsburg home.

recently changed his focus from engineering, which he spent several years doing in the Navy, to video game design and programming.

“I’m really looking forward to school,” he said. “I originally felt obligated to follow that [engineering] path. But I didn’t want the rest of my life to be like it was in the Navy, the same mind-

numbing work every day. I don’t see programming as work. I like seeing the finished product. It seemed like the best route for me to go.

“I want to be able to give back to the organization what they’ve given to me,” Fairchild said of taking on duties as house manager for the 4th Street facility. “Seeing as how I had nothing before

I came in but they helped me get on my feet, get situated and find out what I want to do for the rest of my life. I want to be able to give back what I’ve gotten.”

“He’s already looking ahead and has a vision,” Leone noted. “He’s chasing something that will make him personally content.

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Volunteers with Vets for Vets, including board members Nick Degiglio, left center, and Mike Stephens, far right, pour concrete at the home of wounded veteran Michele Labant of Pottstown. The organization was able to do numerous projects at the site with a \$15,000 grant from Home Depot.



Kyle Fairchild, a Navy vet, works on gaming design and programming coursework he is studying at Montgomery County Community College.

Der Schnitzelbonk by Carl Arner

Liewa Deitscha friend,

Heit is der 1 Yanner 2015 un yah wider en Nei-yohr un wos befall oll fun uns darrich es Yohr duhna m'r nat wissayusht Gott weas sell.

Doh is ebbes yah oll dee Deitscha Leit Sunndawg, 11 Yanner, 2015 un 10:30 a.m. un dee Huffa Karrich dutt dah Peter Fritsch un dah Mike Hertzog es Nei-yohr winsch gewwa in Deitsch. See duhna aw etlicha guta olta Deitscha Karrich Leider singa.

Doh is en Hoch Deitscha Grishtdawg Lied dos m'r g'sunga hen un unser gottes - Diensch.

Communion

OFFERTORY:

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold Him, Born the King of Angels:
O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

God from - God - , Light from Light eternal,

Lo! He abhors - not the Virgin's womb;
Only begotten Son - of the Father;
O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Sing, choirs of angels, Sing in exultation,
Sing all ye citizens of heaven above!
Give to God in - the - Highest;
O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born for us this season,
Jesus, to thee be - glory giv'n!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing:
O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Abendmahl

DANKOPFER:

Herbei, o ihr Gläub'gen, fröhlich triuphiet,
O kommet, o kommet nach Bethlehem!

Sehet das Kindlein, uns zum Heil geboren!
O lasset uns anbeten, O lasset uns anbeten,
O lasset uns anbeten, den Kö-nig!

Du König der Ehren, Herrscher der Heerscharen,
Verschmahst nicht zu ruhn in Marien Schoß.
Gott, wahrer GOtt, von Ewigkeit geboren!
O lasset uns anbeten, O lasset uns anbeten,
O lasset uns anbeten, den Kö-nig!

Kommt, singet dem Herren, singt, ihr Engelchöre,
Frohlocket, frohlocket, ihr Siligen!
Ehre sei GOtt im Himmel und auf Erden.
O lasset uns anbeten, O lasset uns anbeten,
O lasset uns anbeten, den Kö-nig!

Ja, dir, der du heute Mensch Für uns geboren,
Herr Jesu, sei Eh-re und Preis un Ruhm,
Dir fleischgewordnes Wort des ew'gen Vaters!
O lasset uns anbeten, O lasset uns anbeten,
O lasset uns anbeten, den Kö-nig!

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Being able to help a veteran find that level of contentment is really the reason I set forth on this mission."

Under the leadership of both board members like Nick Degiglio and local veterans like Clyde Hoch, who stepped up in Leone's absence, Vets for Vets took on a

variety of projects in the region. At the Lansdale home of Alicia Luberto this spring, the team installed a brand new roof and spent a day trimming trees and doing landscaping, among other minor repairs. Luberto, a veteran of the Army National Guard, suffers from multiple sclerosis.

They also stepped up to the plate for Iraq and Afghanistan veteran Michele Labant, who

served with Degiglio and was seriously injured when an IED hit her armored vehicle in 2011. The Pottstown resident, who has a traumatic brain injury, a fused vertebra and other lingering physical issues from the attack, spent a significant amount of time at military medical facilities like Walter Reed and Ft. Meade before being able to return home.

In August, the VFV team re-

placed a faulty sewer line out to the street from her home, reconstructed a bathroom, did landscaping and roof work, installed a walkway and repaired and painted a fence, which Labant reportedly hopes to use once she gets a service dog. The team also plans to go back to convert a wood stove in the residence to a pellet stove, which is better suited for her current physical limitations.

They worked hand-in-hand with Home Depot on the project, which gave them a \$15,000 grant.

Labant previously donated a Ford Probe to VFV, which Fairchild uses to commute to and from school. She couldn't use the vehicle anymore because it is stick shift, Degiglio said.

VFV also did small projects like raking leaves, shoveling snow and providing transportation for veterans in East Greenville and Upper Hanover and Marlborough townships and as far away as Philadelphia. The organization has been reaching out to the local community to find more veterans who could use assistance and will continue to do so, according to Leone.

"We still want local veterans to reach out to us. That's the local community that got us up and running. It's something we want to improve on," he said. "But word is getting out both in the valley and outside the walls of the valley."

This past year also saw the purchase of a 2001 Ford F250

work truck and the start of weekly visits by a VA representative who has helped several local veterans get needed medical care and equipment. Those visits are open to the public by appointment. VFV also partnered with The Open Link to refurbish their food pantry.

Leone said the organization owes a lot to the individuals and groups that support it. While there are too many to mention by name, this year saw donations by Trappe and Lansdale VFWs, PA Sen. Bob Mensch, the Upper Bucks Rotary, and the North Penn Tactical Team.

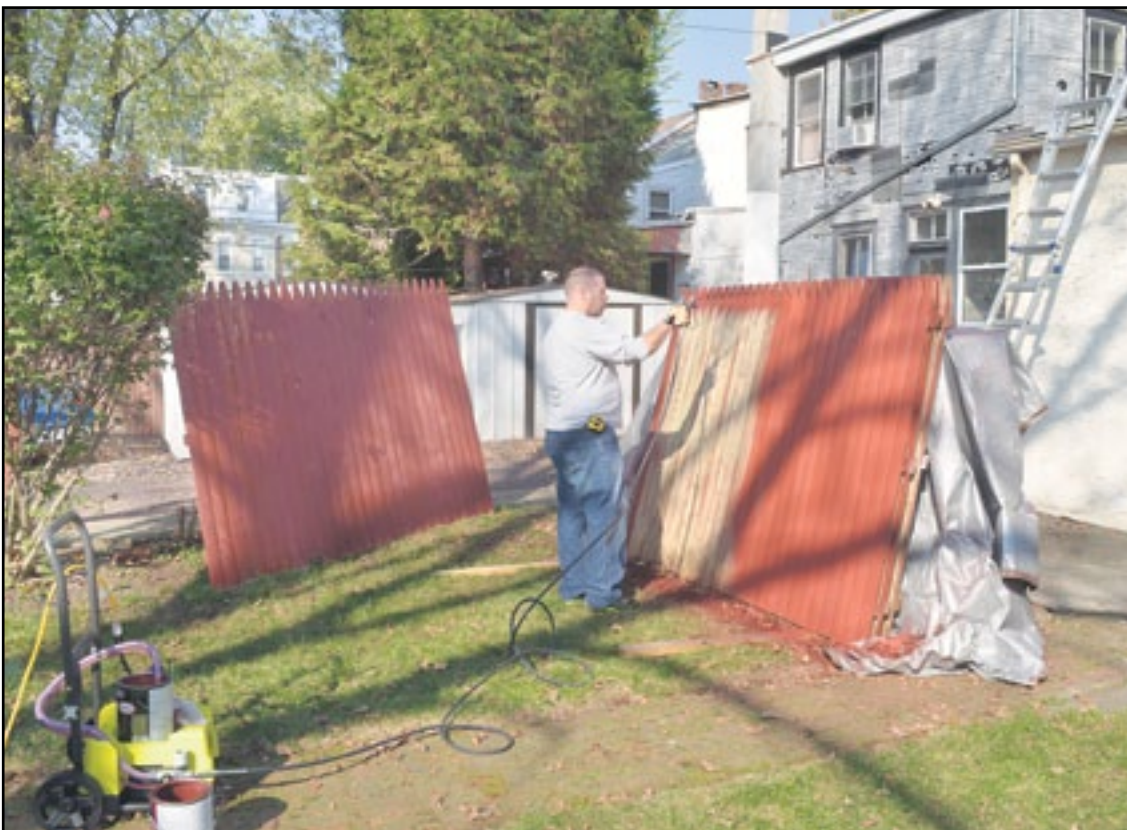
He also noted the immeasurable contributions of time, meals and other necessities by others. VFV remains 100 percent volunteer.

"I'm always saying thanks but thanks for the patience and the support," Leone said. "I know we don't always get out thank-yous for every small donation. We are just a small organization. It doesn't mean we don't appreciate it."

And Leone has no plans to scale back VFV's efforts in the coming year on behalf of area veterans, who he is proud to offer a helping hand.

"My hope is that we continue to build our networking base within our community to continue to serve and fulfill our mission and obligation to veterans in our building and our community," he said.

For more information on VFV, visit www.soldiertocivilian.org or call 484-938-VETS(8387).



A Vets for Vets volunteer spray paints fencing being installed at Michele Labant's Pottstown home. Labant hopes to get a service dog in the coming months.