

Closing the Books

Longtime VFW Service Officer retires after 16 years of service

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Pablo Cruz closed the books on his 16-year career as a VFW Service Officer in Puerto Rico by owning up to a promise he forged back in 2004 with a fellow veteran.

The Vega Baja native and member of VFW Post 12057 at Fort Buchanan in Guaynabo, P.R., came full-circle in the final six months of his tenure, helping the first veteran he encountered on the job earn a slew of retroactive payments dating back to 1981.

“It was a win for him, but also a win for me,” Cruz said. “We became very close working on this case over the past 16 years, and I had promised him I would not retire until his case was finalized.”

Cruz’s efforts in helping fellow comrades apply for earned benefits over the years not only accented VFW’s mission, but punctuated his life’s work following his own retirement from the Army after 24 years. During his career, Cruz served in Korea (1985-86), the Gulf War (1990-91) and the Iraq War (2002).

“Seeing people smiling after they get their benefits is the most rewarding thing,” Cruz admits. “It’s always been about making a difference in the lives of veterans and their families for me.”

Cruz’s retirement as acting service officer for VFW’s Department of Puerto Rico might be met with sadness from local clients, but his replacement hopes to continue to serve at a high level.

“I hope to reach every veteran on the island to apply for their earned benefits,” said Tara Fajardo Arteaga, who relocated to Puerto Rico after serving as an Associate Director in the Membership Department at VFW Headquarters in Kansas City, Mo. “There are so many veterans who don’t even know that they are entitled to these benefits, so I want to influence the lives of as many veterans as I can.”

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Arteaga's aspirations in her new role comes in a transitioning period for the people of Puerto Rico. From veterans to civilians, the island's natural disasters since 2017 have impacted everyone's socioeconomic way of life.

"There has been so much damage to the island between the hurricanes in 2017 and the recent earthquakes in January of this year. People here are suffering and need all the help they can get," Arteaga said. "If the VFW can help to provide a little of that, then I want to be a part of it."

And Arteaga won't be alone, relying on Cruz, whose retirement doesn't limit his contributions and tutelage as Arteaga transitions into her new role. The pair expects to push forward on many incentives, which includes establishing Puerto Rico's first Department Headquarters since 2014.

"This is a joint goal for Pablo and myself so that more veterans can be reached in recruiting efforts and the good news of the VFW can be spread throughout the island," said Arteaga. "This is a great way for me to join my experience in the Membership Department, and my love for the people of Puerto Rico."

This article is courtesy of VFW National Chaplain Jim Jenkins, and is featured in the March/April 2020 issue of VFW Checkpoint. If you're a Post, District or Department Commander and aren't receiving the Checkpoint e-newsletter, please contact the VFW magazine at magazine@vfw.org.