

Operation Access

Georgia Post wraps holiday gifts to help fund important community work

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With a membership of about 90, VFW Post 4092 on St. Simons Island in Georgia is working to make the lives of disabled veterans a little easier. Through a Post project known as Operation Access, Post members build ADA-compliant access ramps, widen doorways and lower cabinets among other projects for disabled vets or nonprofit organizations supporting veterans. And they do it all for free.

With no Post home in which to raise funds through a canteen or gaming, the Post has come up with alternate fundraising ideas. One of those is to offer free holiday giftwrapping to its community.

From Nov. 29-Dec. 24, Post volunteers set up at Belk, a franchise department store located in the Southeast. For those with little time to gift wrap or those who just do not like to wrap gifts, Post 4092 volunteers take care of the wrapping for free. Donations are accepted.

VFW Post Commander Buck Bennett said the Post typically gets about \$4,000 in donations during the holidays because of this endeavor. At the giftwrapping station, a book showing the results of Operation Access is displayed for shoppers.

Bennett said he has seen some shoppers donate as much as \$200 after they find out what the Post is all about.

“We really try to help people out. It’s what we do,” said Bennett who deployed to Bosnia in 2001 and Iraq in 2005 with the Georgia Army National Guard. “We have even recruited new members while giftwrapping because they want to be part of this.”

Bennett’s wife was a marketing specialist for Belk, which is how the Post was able to get its foot in the door. Now, according to Bennett, even as store managers come and go, the Post always gets a call asking if they can come out and wrap gifts during the holidays.

To publicize this community service event, flyers are distributed through the local schools as

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

well as a robust social media campaign.

Wrapping paper is collected throughout the year. This is the fourth year the Post has done this. Bennett said the five days before Christmas are always the busiest.

The Post also has an active Buddy Poppy campaign to help fund Operation Access. An unnamed benefactor has reimbursed the Post for the cost of an accessible ramp, which runs about \$3,000.

Bennett said ramps are built modularly so that should the time come where a vet no longer needs it, the Post can take it apart and use it at another location.

Last year, VFW Post 4092 was named All-American. Someone from another state reached out to Bennett to ask how the Post went from nearly nothing to receiving this honor.

“I told him you have to adapt and overcome to accommodate the younger generation of veterans,” Bennett said. “One of our mottos is ‘We don’t have a bar, we have crowbars.’”

This article is featured in the 2024 December issue of Checkpoint. If you're a VFW member and don't currently receive the VFW Checkpoint, please contact VFW magazine at magazine@vfw.org.