

#StillServing on the Go

A Michigan couple travels across the country helping veterans at VFW Posts

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The idea came to Nathan Moran and his girlfriend, Michelle Decker, while on a date.

The VFW and Auxiliary members of Post 7581 in Wayland, Mich., often had their date nights at VFW or American Legion halls, basking in the company of veterans and family members sharing stories in the spirit of camaraderie.

During this time, about two years ago, the couple noticed a trend through conversations with fellow VFW members about veterans being turned away because of improper paperwork or no knowledge on how to join.

“We would see them get turned away without an answer or guidance on how to attain the information needed,” said Moran, an Afghanistan War veteran who was named the 2022-2023 VFW National Deputy Chief of Staff. “We wanted to make sure nobody else would get turned away without answers. We felt the need to bring awareness, help educate members and document these places as we’ve watched so many close in the last few years.”

The couple began traveling across the country on their own dime to achieve this goal, gathering adventures, picturesque photos, new friends and many a ‘thanks’ from those they’ve helped along the way. Each adventure is documented on their Facebook blog — “Michigan VFW and American Legion Explorer.”

From Copper Harbor in Michigan, about 568 miles north of Wayland, to Savannah, Georgia, and everywhere in between, Moran and Decker have visited more than 170 VFW Posts to date.

“Usually it starts out with an idea of how we want to spend the day, which is usually an antique mall,” Moran said. “From there we look for Posts that we haven’t visited along the route there and back. Most of them are on a whim, as we’ve found multiple posts that didn’t register on Google Maps because nobody has added them.”

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At each Post, they begin by taking photos that they offer to upload to the Post's social media platforms in hopes of creating a larger online presence, but they soon introduce an array of free and voluntary services on behalf of veterans. They speak with members about re-issuing medals for free, helping others file DD-214 documents and even spreading the word on DNA testing for Korean and Vietnam War orphans.

"Once they find out all the different things we do, the questions come very quickly," Moran said. "We have a 'cheat sheet' we use to email to people with hyperlinks to benefits and resources that can help them. If we find a veteran who is still with us that hasn't contacted their VSO, we give them contact information for them as well."

Moran and Decker also take down questions from members about certain subjects they may not have an answer for at the time, penciling their contact info to reach out once they find it. They leave business cards at each Post for those wanting to reach out after the fact, as well as carry a "master list" of all places visited in their travel car, which they update often.

Among the many who have witnessed the impact of Moran and Decker's volunteerism is Garrett Dickey, commander of VFW Post 2144 in Holland, Michigan, and VFW Department of Michigan's membership director.

"Their actions bring the VFW Posts they visit into the community and create visibility for those who would not normally be aware of all the good this organization does," Dickey said. "But above all else, they perform these duties selflessly for the benefit of our brothers and sisters. Michelle and Nathen are true ambassadors to the VFW and its Auxiliary."

Like Dickey, whose Post members have benefited from Moran and Decker, past Post 2144 commander Michael Martin has seen the impact himself.

"Nate and Michelle bring a huge amount of awareness to people who are not members of any veterans organization, but also to comrades who may only be familiar with their own Post," Martin added. "Their descriptions of the Posts and the members there motivate others to visit, even to plan trips around visiting the Post themselves."

Unfortunately, despite their generous nature and devotion to serving veterans, Moran added, not all Posts have welcomed them without scrutiny. There are hurdles along the way.

"Almost all of the places we visit, everyone is extremely welcoming right when we walk through the door," Moran said. "That is comforting, and makes the visit better than we expected. We have only encountered a few places where the welcome was not received."

For Moran, the unwelcoming Posts are an example of the limiting factor in continuing to increase VFW membership among the younger generation of veterans.

“All Posts should view anyone coming through the doors as a potential new VFW member,” Moran said. “It takes all of us to keep these Posts open and the legacy continuing. It really all comes down to the canteen hostess and members present. That is the representation and first impression people get, and decide if they would ever visit that establishment again.”

When they’re not traveling across the country to visit VFW Posts, Moran and Decker spend their time cleaning veterans’ gravestones in and around Wayland, as well as educating others on how to clean them and what solutions to use.

“Everything we do, we do for veterans,” Moran said. “This summer we look forward to traveling to a few new states in hopes of meeting new friends, spotlighting some amazing Posts and bringing our followers with us on our adventures.”