

‘We Have More Things in Common Than We Have Differences’

A veterans building in Grinnell, Iowa, is getting a much-needed renovation and will offer a space for veterans interested in honing their artistic talents, with a VFW member among those leading the charge

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In its heyday, the Veterans Memorial Building in Grinnell, Iowa, was used for high school dances, as a polling station, class reunions and family reunions. At one point, the DMV even leased space in the building, located in Central Park in the heart of this college town about an hour east from Des Moines.

As times changed, the building sat empty and eventually fell into a state of disrepair. But thanks to many years of hard work by a group of Grinnellians, that’s about to change.

As quartermaster of VFW Post 3932 in Grinnell, Randall Hotchkin is one of those people serving as a driving force to get the building remodeled. The goal, according to Hotchkin, is to have the space used for an artist residency program for veterans.

The plans, Hotchkin said, includes adding a large atrium space and sleep rooms in the lower level for the artists.

Hotchkin, who retired from the Air Force in 2013 after more than 22 years of service, said Tom Lacina, a lawyer in Grinnell, has sponsored an artist residency on his farm north of Grinnell.

“Since his farm is not in town, it wasn’t like these artists could just cross the street to go to a restaurant or a bar,” Hotchkin said. “But Tom is a problem-solver and thought this building would make a good artist residency.”

A Grinnell native, Hotchkin said his motivation for seeing this project through is quite personal. His father was a Vietnam veteran who suffered from PTSD.

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“He battled nightmares nearly every night,” Hotchkin said. “He found solace in working with twisted willow and making sticks. He got into photography and making frames and woodworking. So this touched a chord in me. It’s one of the major reasons I’m so passionate about this.”

Hotchkin believes the Veterans Memorial Building will enhance this community of some 10,000 people.

Home to Grinnell College, one of the top 10 liberal arts colleges in the United States, Grinnell has often experienced a divide between the college intellectuals and those who have long lived in the farming community.

“I know this space will prove that we have more things in common than we have differences,” Hotchkin said. “Every small town needs to find its niche, and it seems like this artist angle could be ours.”

Hotchkin said that artists applying for a residency will be told upfront that they are to be involved in the community and will be asked how they envision that taking place.

Currently, Grinnell has a large artist base through its Grinnell Area Art Council. An art center is housed in the former library in town. There also is “The Stew,” which is a space where community members or college students can go use a pottery wheel or 3D printer.

“I look at what we are doing as bridging the gap in the community,” Hotchkin said. “I think about how divided this nation is. Then I think about a college student or a college professor standing next to a farmer in overalls, standing side-by-side looking at a piece of art.”

‘QUITE A JOURNEY’

Hotchkin helped establish the Grinnell Veterans Memorial Commission Building Campaign in 2015. The group set out to raise \$1.9 million to refurbish the space. To date, it has collected \$1.5 million and recently applied for a \$400,000 grant. The state of Iowa has provided a good deal of funding for the group, as has the Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation in Grinnell.

A tax levy voted on by the citizens of Grinnell will provide \$100,000 annually for 20 years for the Grinnell Veterans Memorial Building.

On all four sides of the building are large signs displaying renderings of the proposed facility from the angle it is being viewed. A QR code is included on the signs as a way to find out more about the project.

Hotchkin, who served from August 2004 to January 2005 at Balad Air Bases in Iraq as an Air Force medical technician, said the commission plans to bid out the project renovations

and begin construction this year.

“It’s been quite a journey,” he said. “We are excited about what this will do for our community as a whole.”

This article is featured in the 2022 January issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.