

Published August 15th, 2012

Veterans Offer Hope, Extend Hand of Friendship

Laurie Snyder



Lafayette resident and U.S. Navy veteran David Lipscomb (right) demonstrates a woodworking planing technique to former Army medic Mia Guerts. Photo Ohlen Alexander

A different kind of American military campaign was launched recently on a hot, dry, August morning in Lamorinda. Many in attendance had seen prior action - some just recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. This time, though, the staging area was the Orinda Library.

Returning Veterans of America (RVA), a non-profit organization co-founded in 2011 by current-era combat veterans, presented its first Welcome Home event on Saturday August 11 to thank men and women for their service to the nation and help them connect with resources proven to ease their transition from war to peace.

"Orinda, Lafayette and their conjoining towns are the gateway to the largest population density of veterans in California," said Jason Deitch, Ph.D., RVA's Director of Community Development and Clinical Operations, and former Army Ranger who founded the Cal Veterans Group at the University of California, Berkeley in 2004. Deitch "designs, seeks out and implements streamlined methods for accessing benefits for returning veterans of the U.S. Military," according to RVA's web site, and works "to provide positive peer mentorship."

The support of residents in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda is so important, said Deitch, because 10 percent of all males above the age of 18 in and around the Lamorinda

area have performed military service. RVA, he said, is "trying to galvanize the cooperation" of the local businesses, healthcare providers and service agencies most likely to be in a position to guide veterans on their new journeys.

Ryan Berg, Deitch's colleague and RVA's Executive Director and founder of Diablo Valley College's Student Veterans Group, saw action as an Infantry Marine stationed 20 kilometers south of Baghdad. Berg's RVA co-founder, Mia Guerts, entered the Army at the age of 18. After completing training as a medic, she was sent to Wiesbaden, Germany and then Iraq, and later decided to become an Army doctor, tackling the tough curricula of Cal's molecular and cellular biology program in preparation for medical school.

All three know first-hand how overwhelming the return to civilian life can be; all three knew that they could be of service to others still in the process of transitioning. "We've made it; so you can you," is their message.

Berg envisions RVA as an outreach arm for the many agencies the average veteran is expected to negotiate at the county and federal levels. "There are barriers in their official capacities," he said of Veterans Affairs personnel who often fail to connect effectively with those they are charged with assisting. Those barriers can make men and women reluctant to reach out once they've been let down.

Attendees at RVA's first social and luncheon event, which was presented in partnership with the Contra Costa County Library and the U.S. Institute of Library and Museum Services, received real-time Veterans Affairs claims processing help, and were welcome to spend time swapping stories and hanging out in a video game-equipped lounge at the Orinda Library. They also worked with experienced vets one-on-one to get resume and job search advice, and explore new opportunities for personal growth in programs such as the woodworking group offered by Lafayette resident Tim Killian.

A former Bechtel contractor who toiled in Iraq's much publicized "green zone," Killian has an intimate understanding of the toll that working in high stress environments can take on the human spirit. His club, which includes Lafayette resident and U.S. Navy veteran David Lipscomb and several other volunteers, is partnering with RVA to teach vets the basics of woodworking. Killian hopes to teach vets the higher level of craftsmanship needed to create quality, handmade furniture for resale.

Deitch spoke enthusiastically of Killian's program saying that, in the very peaceful and quiet setting afforded, veterans experience a transformation as they are "watching something being created, not destroyed."

If you're a veteran - or if you simply love or admire one - be sure to turn out for RVA's next program at the Orinda Library August 25 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Veterans of all ages are welcome, and vets from Iraq and Afghanistan are particularly encouraged to attend. Contact RVA for directions from BART or instructions on where to park if you plan to drive: www.returningvet.org.

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA