

Getting a 'Buzz' from Beekeeping

Programs across the country offer apiculture courses to help veterans find peace, learn a new trade and help the environment.

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Gary LaGrange is a soldier first and a beekeeper second. The VFW member served three tours during the Vietnam War. Two were in the I Corps region of South Vietnam — 1967-68 with the 198th Light Infantry Brigade and 1968-69 with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. He then served 18 months between 1971-73 in Laos with the Military Advisory Group Laos. LaGrange continued his service when he came home, eventually retiring from the Army as a colonel.

As an Iowa-born, Minnesota-bred farm child, LaGrange and his cousin raised bees together throughout their childhood. It wasn't until six years ago that LaGrange revisited beekeeping.

"I just did it to keep myself occupied," said LaGrange, a member of VFW Post 1786 in Manhattan, Kan. "To me, it's beyond a hobby. It's a great endeavor. It's something special."

Beekeeping is not a new trade, nor is the idea of a veteran taking up beekeeping. In fact, the story has been written about before, including in the classic American novel *Keeper of the Bees*, by Gene Stratton-Porter. The book focuses on a WWI veteran who finds solace in beekeeping after returning home from war.

And today, much like in the novel written almost 100 years ago, LaGrange helps fellow veterans and active-duty troops find peace through beekeeping.

LaGrange is the director of SAVE Farm — Service member Agricultural Vocational Education Farm — which he helped establish about five years ago in conjunction with the Army's Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Riley in Kansas. He also received input from his daughter, who is a clinical psychologist specializing in post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury.

"My daughter was working with soldiers at Fort Riley where they have a greenhouse,"

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LaGrange said. “She discovered there is healing there.”

Working with the Department of Agriculture and VA, LaGrange and a board of directors developed the idea of a training farm, not just to promote healing physically and mentally, but also to teach a trade that could offer career opportunities to transitioning veterans.

“We thought a training farm would be a great way to recover from issues veterans and service members bring back — visible and invisible wounds,” LaGrange said.

‘We Help Them Heal’

Located near Manhattan, Kan., the apiary program at SAVE teaches veterans how to work with bees and how to build and sell beekeeping equipment. Veterans learn woodworking, metalworking and business acumen, among other farming skills.

According to LaGrange, one third of the foodstuffs that Americans eat is made possible because of honeybee pollination. Unfortunately, beekeepers have experienced a troubling loss of some

30 percent to 40 percent of colonies each year. LaGrange attributes the loss to several factors, including insecticides, herbicides and the Varroa mite, which drains the bees of their “blood equivalent” and passes on viruses.

“It became most notable about 15 years ago when the mite found its way to the U.S. and spread rapidly,” he said. “More than 50 percent of all hives in this country were lost within a couple of years.”

With some 1.5 million transitioning veterans and servicemembers seeking a path after life in the military, the necessity for veteran beekeeping programs became clear.

“Although it’s a niche, it’s a large endeavor,” LaGrange said of the farm’s apiary program.

In 2013, SAVE accepted eight veterans and service members to test the program. Since then, 228 have completed training in basic and commercial beekeeping practices. The farm provides modified equipment to accommodate amputees or others with disabilities.

As a longtime VFW member, LaGrange has seen a number of other VFW members pass through and benefit from beekeeping.

“They are looking to one day work on, manage and run bee farms,” LaGrange said. “The most beautiful thing I’ve discovered working with them and beekeeping is that there is so much recovery that occurs. Some veterans come in taking 12 different pills and they’re pretty unraveled. By the end of the program, some are completely off pills and sleeping better. That’s really the special thing. We help them heal while they are on the farm.”

The research on therapeutic elements of beekeeping and veterans is limited. One of the goals of SAVE Farm is to open up its apiary operation for peer-reviewed, evidence-based research so that professionals can explore what makes beekeeping so helpful. But LaGrange knows from personal experience.

“I’m occupied, and I’ve found purpose,” LaGrange said. “It’s something valuable that has a beginning and an end — I start with the beginning of the season and end up with processed honey. No one is pushing and shoving and asking things of you. You set your own schedule. It’s a peaceful thing to do, working with nature and your hands, creating something valuable.”

Something New to Pursue

The SAVE Farm is not the only place where veterans have found growth and purpose through beekeeping.

In conjunction with the University of Minnesota and the Metropolitan Airports Commission in Minneapolis, the Bee Squad was founded in honor of Marine Corps veteran and beekeeper Michael Roche.

In 2016, the Bee Squad began offering free apiary workshops for veterans interested in learning more about bees and how to keep them.

“Through our conversations over the colonies, Michael [Roche] and other Bee Squad members talked about how beekeeping was a wonderful way to spend time and relax,” said Becky Masterman, the program director and extension educator for the Bee Squad. “We all found such joy in it that he really believed that he would like to bring that joy to veterans.”

The Bee Squad keeps its workshops small — only six veterans per class — but they are open to any military veteran and a guest. Workshops operate on a drop-in basis, meaning vets can come to just one class or attend all 10 throughout the season.

“Beekeeping is something that people do with someone else,” Masterman said. “We provide support to veterans and give them something new to pursue.”

Masterman said she has had a husband-and-wife team participate in classes because they already had bees and wanted to learn how to manage them together. She’s also worked with student veterans who just want to experience an open hive.

Masterman said it might feel counterintuitive to feel peace while opening a box filled with 40,000 bees, but that is what she sees when she works with veterans through Bee Squad.

“I have one self-described PTSD sufferer who saw an advertisement when he was going to a veteran program, and he drove 400 miles each way to come to classes,” Masterman said.

“He said that when you are keeping bees, you are focused on something that’s totally different than your own problems. You lose time by focusing on the bees. He found that peace in beekeeping that Roche wanted him to find.”

Roche died in May 2017, but the Bee Squad veterans program lives on in his honor and continues to adapt to the needs of the veteran participants.

This article is featured in the March 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kelly Gibson](#). Gibson is an editor at Sunflower Publishing in Lawrence, Kan.