

Warfighters to the Rescue

Amid last year’s hurricane season, an Afghanistan War veteran created a group composed of VFW members and first responders designed to provide disaster relief

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Mylee Cardenas met Gamalier Rosa while helping hurricane victims in Puerto Rico last year, and their interaction proved that VFW stereotypes are wrong.

“Sometimes it’s easy to think it’s very old school [and there’s] not something there for you,” said Cardenas, executive director of Warfighter DRT (disaster response team). “Working with Gam, we were able to see how much good, and how much more, we could do with that partnership with the VFW.”

Warfighter DRT is an organization that offers veterans and first responders a chance to give back through community service. Cardenas became a member of VFW’s Department of Florida after meeting Rosa, who is commander of Post 754 in Amherst, Mass. She officially formed Warfighter DRT in October to help hurricane victims in Puerto Rico. However, its members had been using the name since assisting with hurricane relief efforts in Texas and Florida the prior month.

Making the VFW Connection

Rosa, who served at Camp Ramadi in Iraq from July to September 2010 with the 703rd Brigade Support Bn., 315th Inf. Regt., as a food-service specialist, said Warfighter DRT established a “constant relationship” with VFW Post 12064 in Ponce, Puerto Rico.

Rosa traveled to Puerto Rico in October — with VFW assistance — to volunteer during relief efforts after the Category 5 Hurricane Maria swept through the island.

Rosa established VFW support, presenting a 22-page proposal to Massachusetts State Commander Eric Segundo, and received \$1,000 from the Department of Massachusetts, \$1,000 from nonprofit VetAir, \$100 from VFW Post 8006 in Florence, Mass., and its

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Auxiliary, and \$100 from VFW Post 872 in Southwick, Mass. His home Post donated funds for travel.

‘Moved to Tears’

Cardenas served with the Army in Afghanistan from 2011-12. She worked with Warfighter DRT in Puerto Rico from Oct. 1 to Jan. 1, with the exception of two days home for Thanksgiving. The most impactful aspect of her time in Puerto Rico was witnessing the resiliency of Puerto Rican citizens, as well as the National Guard and state guard.

“They were on orders before the storm even hit and were stuck on orders helping and working up until about three weeks ago,” Cardenas said in January.

Another young vet, Laura Brown, who served in Iraq from 2008-2010 with the 70th Trans. Co., as a motor transport operator, linked up with Warfighter DRT after traveling to Puerto Rico with a friend who volunteered with the group in the past.

“It was such a shock because the news in America only talked about [Puerto Rico] for very little,” Brown said. “I got the understanding from just the news that Puerto Rico was OK.”

Brown, who intends to join Post 754, worked with Warfighter DRT from Oct. 5 to Nov. 13. While she helped other countries during her deployments, she said it was nice to put her skills to use helping her own country.

Her main tasks were to deliver supplies to “locals in dire need” and perform wellness checks. Warfighter DRT volunteers would locate family members, offer supplies and take photos and video to send back to family members in the states.

On one wellness check, Rosa located VFW member Rene Fuertes’ in-laws. Fuertes, who served in Haiti in 1994 with the Navy as part of Operation Uphold Democracy, said he was “moved to tears” by Rosa’s efforts.

“It brought a lot of joy,” said Fuertes, commander of VFW Post 3389 in Randolph, Mass. “Sometimes, it’s a small token. It’s amazing how big an impact it made knowing that somebody brought some water.”

Andrew LaPre, a member of VFW Post 754, joined Warfighter DRT after seeing television coverage of the group and contacted the group through its website.

“I had some vacation time at work that I was about to lose in the new year,” LaPre said, “and I had been wanting to get involved. I just saw everything that was going on in Puerto Rico and thought it would be great to help out.”

LaPre, who served with the 110th Maintenance Co., in Iraq in 2003, distributed food and

water in Puerto Rico for one week. He also helped clean up at a zoo.

“It’s life-changing, just the amount of people I was around,” LaPre said. “It brings the word ‘selfless’ to a whole ‘nother level.”

The most memorable event for Brown during her six weeks in Puerto Rico was delivering supplies to a remote village that had not been in contact with anyone in 19 days.

“They were drinking rain water and coconut water, and they were almost out of coconuts,” Brown said. “We gave one lady a bag of coffee, and she had tears in her eyes. She was so happy to have some coffee.”

Cardenas projects that the organization will have a presence on the island for at least three years.

‘Like a Big Family’

The first goal of the Warfighter DRT, according to Cardenas, is to be a resource for veterans and first responders who are transitioning from service.

“We spend all of our time [serving] helping people all over the world,” Cardenas said. “It’s rare that we get to help our own community.”

The organization’s membership base fluctuates, but Cardenas said its “base team” consists of 17 people. Membership remains steady at around 45 members, Cardenas said, as volunteers rotate in and out of relief efforts.

In addition to disaster relief, Cardenas said the group also conducts local efforts to help strengthen and grow communities.

“For us, the significance is helping veterans realize that they’re not done just because they took that uniform off or that service contract is over,” Cardenas said.

Rosa, who was in Puerto Rico from Oct. 16 to Jan. 2, said Warfighter DRT relies on the skills and esprit de corps its volunteers gained during their military service. Personally, he felt that he had lost the feeling of camaraderie from serving — until Warfighter DRT.

LaPre said what he found “most special” about the organization is how veterans of different military services interacted with each other.

“Usually, there’s not animosity, but almost like a divide between the branches and how they are working with each other,” LaPre said, “but there was none of that. There were people from all different branches. It was like a big family.”

Having spent nearly 13 years in the military, Cardenas said it “felt wrong” to sit at home

when she could put her skills to use.

“You have to remind yourself that you’re not in [the service] anymore,” Cardenas said. “But I’ve been volunteering my time since I got out. I truly believe in service after service.”

For more information, or to volunteer with Warfighter DRT, visit [facebook.com/WarfighterDRT/](https://www.facebook.com/WarfighterDRT/).

This article is featured in the April 2018 issue of [VFW Magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor, VFW magazine. Photo courtesy of Gamalier Rosa.