

VFW Member Feeds Hungry Veterans Across the Country

Starting with just one hungry veteran years ago, Rich Synek launched an ambitious plan, and now he, his wife, Michele, and a team of volunteers provide nourishment to veterans and their families

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Since 2008, a grassroots, VFW-member-led effort has fed more than 15,000 veterans nationwide, distributed more than 1 million pounds of food and donated more than \$80,000 in gift cards. And it all started with one postage stamp.

VFW Department of New York member Rich Synek was postmaster in Vernon Center, N.Y., when he noticed WWII vet Orley Baker purchasing one stamp at a time because that is all he could afford to buy.

Synek soon learned that Baker and his wife had only enough money to buy food for two weeks out of every month.

“I just couldn’t get over how horrible it was that a WWII veteran was going hungry,” said Synek, who earned the Navy Expeditionary Medal off the coast of Libya in 1986. “For that matter, anyone being hungry is unacceptable.”

Soon after learning this about Baker, Synek and his wife, Michele, took food to the vet’s home, only to find empty cupboards and an empty refrigerator, other than a few condiments.

That’s when Synek knew what he had to do. He retired 11 years early and found his calling. And so was born Feed Our Vets, a New York-based nonprofit veterans-only food pantry.

With pantries in Utica and Watertown, Feed Our Vets also has a mobile unit that feeds veterans monthly in Syracuse. Additionally, the unit takes food to Binghamton, Buffalo and Albany. Numerous times, it has traveled as far away as Philadelphia.

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To receive assistance at the pantries, vets only need to bring in a DD-214 and a photo ID or a VA card. No questions are asked. How vets end up at the pantry is not important to Synek and the teams of volunteers.

One such volunteer is Vietnam veteran Joe Ancona. He's been the director of the Utica pantry for eight years. He retired from the Army after 20 years before going to work for the state. After he retired, he thought he would do some volunteer work.

"Rich married my youngest sister and that's how I got roped into this," he said and laughed. "It's really like having another job, but that's OK."

Most weeks, Ancona puts in 25-40 hours a week. While the pantry is open every Wednesday from 3-6 p.m. and the third Saturday of every month from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., it takes a lot of work to stock it.

Each week sees about 50-60 veterans coming in for food, and the volunteer staff of 12 makes sure everyone receives a portion.

"Some vets cannot make it in during our regular hours, and I'll meet them after hours," Ancona said. "There are a lot of hungry people out there, so you do what you gotta do, you know?"

Ancona added that some people are hungry enough that they try to con him. They will say they were in the military but cannot prove it. In those situations, the volunteers will give a person enough food to get through the day and refer them to other places for assistance.

"We're never going to turn away a hungry person," Ancona said.

Selena Dewey also volunteers her time at the Utica food pantry. She's been there about a year. October will mark three years since her husband died just one month shy of retiring after 30 years in the Air Force.

"People always say that the best way to heal is by helping others," Dewey said. "I really wanted to get involved with something that would help veterans. This has truly helped my healing process."

Dewey is charged with weighing the food as it leaves the pantry. The IRS requires all food to be weighed both in and out.

She noted that veterans from WWII to Iraq utilize the pantry, adding that it's particularly sad to see WWII vets in a position of needing assistance finding food.

"It has been the most humbling and rewarding experience," Dewey said. "Each week, we, as

volunteers, thank the veterans for their service. They always thank us. They are so appreciative of us. But it seems so wrong that they feel like they have to say thank you.”

FRESH VEGETABLES APLENTY

Army veteran Carl Davis is one of the veterans who regularly visits the Utica pantry, which he calls a “society within a society.”

Davis, who was severely injured years ago while serving as an Army welder at Ft. Ord, Calif., is 100 percent disabled and has three children.

“I don’t know what I would do without this,” Davis said. “You know, they can shut off the cable and that’s fine because you don’t have to have that. But when you don’t have food for your family, it really hits home.”

While talking on the phone for this article, Davis noted that he was cooking a pork roast with fresh vegetables that he had received at the pantry. He added that he always gets milk, eggs, cheese, bread and fresh vegetables.

“It’s not like you come in and they give you a box of macaroni and call it good,” he said. “They really care for us vets because they are vets, too. I pray for them every day.”

Davis added that he appreciates the camaraderie at the pantry. They know how to relate to one another and “speak the same language.”

FEED OUR VETS IS A ‘LIFESAVER’

Besides the pantries and mobile unit, Feed Our Vets sends gift cards to veterans in 38 states. As of May 20, more than \$80,000 in gift cards had been distributed around the country.

The family of Amber and Anthony Hockensmith, from Georgetown, Ky., is the recipient of a \$75 gift card each month.

Amber said the family, which includes four children, was doing pretty good on the couple’s dual income. But after Anthony’s two tours in Iraq with the Army, where he was wounded in multiple IED explosions, all of that changed.

Diagnosed with PTSD and traumatic brain injury — with side effects including short-term memory loss, seizures and night terrors — Anthony is no longer able to work.

Amber, who previously worked in the medical industry in an administrative role, now is his full-time caregiver. From her caregiver support group, she found out about Feed Our Vets.

“I learned to coupon, and that \$75 lasts us the entire month,” Amber said. “No words really describe how great Rich and his wife are. They are amazing.”

Amber noted that the application process for Feed Our Vets was “simple,” easy and not invasive.

“There are no questions about why you need help or for how long,” Amber said. “They just help, no questions asked.”

Nikiea Shelton agrees. Her husband, Dustin, was wounded in Iraq while serving in the Army. He was rated 90 percent disabled by the VA due to spinal cord complications.

Last November, while pregnant with two children at home, Nikiea lost her source of income. She doesn’t recall how she heard about Feed our Vets but said she’s glad she did. The family in Georgia receives a \$75 gift card each month from the New York operation.

“Without this, we wouldn’t make it through the last week of the month,” Nikiea said. “Even if it was \$20, it would help. Feed Our Vets has been a lifesaver on more than one occasion.”

Synek recalled a woman he helped in Arkansas who wrote him a letter that nearly brought him to tears. She told him she hadn’t had anything to eat in days and then received a \$75 Walmart gift card. She went out and bought a lot of food and came home and made a good dinner for her family.

“I just can’t imagine,” he said. “I mean, it is food. It’s what the rest of us just take for granted.”

‘THE BEST FEELING IN THE WORLD’

Since Feed Our Vets does not receive any federal or state funding, Synek said the group relies on individuals, businesses and community groups to help pay its bills.

“We have churches and other organizations that host food drives for us,” he said. “And we do different fundraising programs as well.”

The latest such fundraising endeavor is the auctioning off of a restored 1990 AM General Humvee. Synek began researching this idea a few years ago, hoping to find someone to donate one.

“I reached out to several donors with this idea and asked if they would like to be a part of this project,” Synek said. “After several months of talk, one of them donated one from Robbins Air Force Base in Georgia.”

In January 2017, Feed Our Vets received the vehicle. The restoration was completed by Steve Hale from Steve’s Restoration in Frankfort, N.Y. Synek said Dewey secured a lot of parts for the restoration, saving “tens of thousands of dollars.”

FOV 1, as it's now called, is at the Saratoga Auto Museum in Saratoga, N.Y. At press time, a charity auction had been scheduled there for Sept. 22.

“All of this is more rewarding to me than anything else,” Synek said. “When a vet leaves one of our pantries with a week’s worth of free food, it’s the best feeling in the world.”

Synek said Feed Our Vets has no plans on slowing down. He hopes it does well enough on the auction that in a year or so they can have an FOV 2 to auction. For now, Synek and his volunteers will continue feeding as many as they can with what they have.

“If I only fed one veteran, it was all totally worth it,” he said. “The people like Carl and Amber and all the 3,525 vets we fed last year are what keep me going.”

For more information on Feed Our Vets and the vets they help, visit www.feedourvets.org or check out the Feed Our Vets Facebook page for updates.

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