

Lieutenant ‘Green Thumb’

A veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars brought the inspiration for a self-sustaining garden home from the war zone, and it's that same outside-the-box thinking serves him well in his role of deputy mayor

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After two tours overseas with the Navy — one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan — former Lt. Vincent Grasso returned to his Long Island suburb, ripped up his front lawn and crafted a self-sustaining, agricultural ecosystem on his tiny 45-foot-by-100-foot lot. Grasso, the deputy mayor of Valley Stream, N.Y., jokes that his neighbors initially thought he was performing some sort of ritualistic pet burial.

A member of VFW Post 1790 in Valley Stream, Grasso served in Iraq in 2006 as a petty officer 1st class working as an intelligence specialist with SEAL Team 5. In 2013, he deployed to Afghanistan as an intelligence officer with the Special Operations Joint Task Force. Grasso is 5-feet-10-inches of pure, distilled sarcasm. He only revealed his true height after repeatedly insisting he was 6-feet-4, explaining, “I loom large.”

It’s unclear whether his sense of humor was learned in or was merely strengthened by the Navy. Perhaps it came from his mother, who once joked that she would move to Canada during wartime if she ever gave birth to a son. As a payback, Grasso chose Mother’s Day in 2006 to explain that he was headed to Iraq.

“I had to tell her sooner or later,” he said with a smirk.

Combat Exposes True Character

Regardless, underneath his sardonic shell, Grasso, 45, is guided by a firm set of principles that, to him, are sacred.

The question of what assets human beings need to thrive is inextricably linked to Grasso’s

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fascination with sustainability. He observed that when people lash out in desperation — violently or otherwise — it often is because they lack basic resources such as money, food, housing or education.

“In combat zones, you really do see the best and worst of human beings,” Grasso said. “I feel like Iraq and Afghanistan made me far more empathetic than 19-year-old Vincent would’ve been.”

Whether it was collecting or collating reports or conducting intelligence analyses, Grasso said his duties as a human intelligence officer in Fallujah and Rawa during his Iraq tour were more studious than anything else. If a given terror cell was planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along a particular route, that intelligence would be compiled and handed off to the SEALs who would “action” it.

“It was nerve-wracking,” Grasso said. “They’re very real stakes. People are going to get killed, and you don’t want to screw up.”

Grasso recalled that Iraq after the 2003 invasion was a “blank slate.” Roads, basic infrastructure and telecommunications systems had largely been destroyed by the time he’d arrived.

He remembered hearing of attempts to build medical clinics in parts of Iraq that ultimately failed because there were not enough trained doctors or nurses to staff them. To him, that was a lack of holistic thinking.

“It was like putting a \$100,000 tree in the ground without fertilizing it, without watering it, without giving it the things necessary to make it produce what the intention was to produce,” Grasso said. “You can take a tree and stick it in the ground — that doesn’t necessarily do anything.”

Community Leader

When he returned home from Iraq in 2007, he became interested in local government. He said he wanted to be part of decisions that could shape his community, but without the distraction of partisan politics. In Valley Stream, an incorporated village of nearly 40,000 residents a few miles east of John F. Kennedy Airport, Grasso didn’t see a partisan divide.

“What’s the Democratic or Republican way to pick up garbage?” he asked rhetorically.

In between his two deployments, Grasso was appointed to the village board in 2010 to fill a vacancy and was re-elected in 2011. He currently serves in the part-time role of deputy mayor and is up for re-election in 2019.

The VFW member also is the executive director of the Nassau County Bridge Authority. As a

community leader, Grasso said he aims to give people reassurance and to provide them with resources.

“We’ll be better neighbors,” he said. “We’ll be a better community. I think people will be better to one another.” With an eye toward minimizing waste and fostering self-sustenance, Grasso began promoting life-cycle housing in the village.

The idea was to attract developers to build affordable apartment rentals to accommodate housing needs both for empty nesters and young professionals.

‘Look for the Jungle’

Iraq’s “blank slate,” in part, became inspiration for something of a gardening and permaculture obsession for Grasso and his wife, Mary. Grasso describes permaculture as “any agricultural system that is designed to be self-sufficient.”

It wasn’t until Grasso returned from his Afghanistan tour in 2014 that he started tearing up his front lawn and reading books about permaculture. In Kabul, Afghanistan, he was intrigued by networks of underground irrigation tunnels, called karezes, which were used to transport water from higher to lower ground to prevent it from evaporating.

“It’s a system that every step of the way not only nourishes some sort of primary goal, but serves a sort of secondary goal,” Grasso said of permaculture. “The opposite I felt was true of so much of what we do in modern America. Particularly, municipal government.”

In his front yard, for example, berry bushes serve two functions: decorative landscaping and food production. He traps rainwater instead of turning on the hose — emptying his house’s gutters into large drums, inside which there are several goldfish (they eat mosquito larvae and prevent swarms of insects). Once the fish die, they become extra fertilizer elsewhere in the system.

At the height of the growing season, his house disappears behind a thicket of greenery that provides his family with food year-round. His daughter, Belle, 16, has been known to help her friends find the house by telling them to “look for the jungle.”

The Grassos’ garden yields food all year long — such as shitake mushrooms, berries, maple syrup, coffee made from chicory root, apples and peaches. New this year, he planted two tea trees.

It’s hard not to admire Grasso’s level of fanaticism. In village government and around the neighborhood, he has a reputation for bringing creative, and sometimes zany, solutions to the table. For example, he once lobbied for changes to the village code that would have allowed residents to own chickens.

He's an amalgam of his intense experiences and celebratory quirkiness, but it's precisely those ingredients that buck the community groupthink and allow new ideas to grow.

"I want to give people in my community reassurance and comfort," he explained. "I want to remove fear rather than amp up fear, which we see so often in politics and government. We'll be better neighbors and a better community. I think people will be better to one another."

This article is featured in the January 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Nick Ciccone. Nick Ciccone is a freelance writer based in Massapequa, N.Y.