'We are Looked Upon as Leaders'

A group of student veterans at northern Virginia's George Mason University participates in community-service projects with other veterans' groups in the Washington, D.C., area

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While many college students were focusing on final projects, essays and tests during the spring 2019 semester, student veterans at George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Va., made time to serve their community in April.

For the group's final community service project of the school year, Mason Veteran Patriots — the Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter at GMU — helped revitalize Mount Vernon High School, in Mount Vernon, Va. Mason Veteran Patriots' 2018-19 President Rich Strauss, a Marine Corps veteran who graduated in May with a bachelor's degree in clinical psychology, said it is important for veterans to be at the forefront of such community projects.

"We, as veterans, have a very large spotlight on us," said Strauss, who served with the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard the USS Cleveland in 2007-08. "Veterans are held in higher regard than most other groups. We are looked upon as leaders, and it's on us to set the example and make positive changes in our communities."

Student veterans from GMU, along with veterans of the group The Mission Continues, collaborated in 2018 to build a community garden in the courtyard at Mount Vernon High School. Food from the garden helps feed the homeless and under-nourished children in the Washington, D.C., area. It also gave the Mount Vernon students an opportunity to learn how to maintain a food source in an urban environment.

In April, GMU student veterans and The Mission Continues added more to the high school's courtyard by building new benches and restoring facilities in the garden. Strauss said the event served as an opportunity to connect with other veterans in the area and work together to better their community.

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"Being a part of any veterans' service organization, such as SVA or VFW, gives veterans the camaraderie they had during their service," Strauss said. "Service groups give the chance to work with others to accomplish goals."

Working with the VFW

In October, the Mason Veteran Patriots worked with a former VFW Post commander. Walter Sweeney, a Marine Corps veteran, alumnus of George Mason University and member of Post 3150 in Arlington, Va., helped the student vets revitalize the outside area of the Post.

"The Post had kind of fallen into disrepair from 2012 to 2017," Sweeney said. "The outside of the Post was basically trashed. We wanted to beautify and renovate the outside area with the idea that having a solid outdoor area would help to counteract the loss in membership over the previous years."

Sweeney, who served with 2nd Bn., 6th Marines, in 2007-11 and deployed with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard the USS Iwo Jima in 2008-09 and in 2010 to Afghanistan, said it was important to revitalize the Post due to its close proximity to Arlington National Cemetery and other monuments in Washington, D.C. He said there also are a lot of veterans who come to the area, whether to live or travel.

"Since the D.C. area mostly has apartment dwellers, the idea was to have it as everyone's backyard," Sweeney said. "We wanted to bring in those younger veterans to our Post that way."

Building a Veterans' Organization

The Mason Veteran Patriots group only has about 10 members. Strauss said he and other members have been working toward growing the organization.

"Last I heard, George Mason has more than 3,000 military-affiliated students," Strauss said. "But, a lot of them just go to class and go home because a lot of them have families. Veterans are notorious for driving to campus, going to class, then leaving."

Strauss, who worked over the summer as an intern for the Washington, D.C., Mayor's Office, said he has told others on campus about the SVA chapter's service opportunities and how they can help their community. He hopes the chapter will continue to serve its community and work with other veterans' organizations in the area.

Sweeney recommends that VFW Posts connect with SVA chapters in their area to cooperate on projects.

"Posts and Districts should be actively reaching out to SVA chapters, because not only do they have new members there, there is new leadership potential at SVA chapters," Sweeney said. "I haven't been a member of or visited a Post that hasn't needed new leadership within

the next couple of years. The leadership VFW needs is at SVA chapters."

This article is featured in the 2019 August issue of VFW magazine, and was written by Dave Spiva, senior writer for VFW magazine.