

‘We Try to Be There for All of Them’

A VFW Post in Texas showcases why its rapid membership success is a byproduct of the work its members do on an active-duty military base

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Long before becoming commander of the first VFW Post established on an active-duty U.S. military installation last year, Willie Keller had seen the possibilities with a credulous eye.

Joined by other founding members of Post 12209 on Fort Cavazos (formerly Fort Hood) near Killeen, Texas, Keller set out to serve as an example of how a VFW Post on an active military installation can help troops and their families more effectively.

“I wish I had that for me when I was coming up,” said Keller, a 16-year Army veteran who joined VFW in 1995. “It not only helps with recruitment, but it puts us in a position to shed light on stuff that is not getting lit up.”

Since finding its home at Fort Cavazos’ Building 18000 on Jan. 7, 2022, Post 12209’s membership has more than tripled its roster. The Post boosted its numbers from 48 in July 2022 to more than 153 members as of this August, according to Keller.

“And we haven’t dropped the hammer on membership yet,” said Keller, who served in Afghanistan and Iraq before being medically retired in 2009. “The people we have come to us about joining is because of what they see from us.”

Over the last year, Post 12209 has provided more than \$180,000 worth of assistance to service members and their families by tapping into VFW’s well of programs and services. This includes the Military Assistance Program, which provides Posts with grants to help active-duty troops, as well as Unmet Needs grants for military families with financial difficulties.

Unable to host fundraisers on base, Keller added that other sources come from his own members, private donors and the VFW Department of Texas Foundation.

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“There’s no regulation on how to show empathy for these service members and their families, but we try to be there for all of them,” said Keller, who also partakes in advocacy projects, which includes a new bill passed this year to increase the slots for child care at Fort Cavazos. Keller acted on this after hearing from an active-duty single mother.

“We ask people to serve, but they can’t because they need assistance to serve,” Keller added. “We have been an outlet to help fix these problems by going and advocating for more legislative funding.”

Another beacon has been VFW’s Adopt-a-Unit program, which to date has allowed Post 12209 to adopt more than 29 military units comprising thousands of troops at Fort Cavazos.

From cookouts to care packages to simply treating families to a free meal, Keller added that being on base to see the impact of the VFW makes it worth the countless hours he puts in every day.

“When you’re in uniform, it’s your job to care,” Keller said. “But we don’t get paid. This is something we do for them. They see this. The highlight for me is seeing them realize that someone really cares. It’s a good feeling to even see generals on base stop to thank us for what we’ve done.”

Though Keller and his Post members have accomplished much in record time, he admits they are far from complacent. The Post is committed on several fronts, which includes advocating for a more efficient way to use the military’s Transition Assistance Program (TAP), as well as working closely with JROTC and ROTC programs around Texas.

“You can start your transition 12 months out, but mission dictates,” Keller said. “Some have less time to transition. And for some who are institutionalized for 20-30 years, it is not that simple to transition when they used to be a voice of leadership before, and now they are just a number in the civilian world. One of our priority goals is to extract career service members out of their unit and put them on a transitional unit as soon as possible.”

When Keller is not running around conducting business, he admits basking in the gratitude of service members on base who routinely call him and his Post members to talk and thank them for guidance and career advice. Armed with extensive knowledge of VFW’s history, Keller dispenses praise for his organization whenever given the chance.

“It’s valuable to know the history of VFW,” Keller said. “I just let them know why they should join the organization that has been there for them, with them now, and will be with them in the future. A lot of them don’t know some of the stuff service members have now in terms of benefits came from the VFW being in the trenches for them.”

With membership being a byproduct of Post 12209’s assistance and proximity to those in

uniform today, Keller also has a lofty goal regarding this particular area.

“We want to be the largest VFW Post in the world in 36 months,” Keller said. “Like I mentioned before, we haven’t dropped the hammer on membership yet. What made us increase our membership has been the influence of our work alone.”

This article is featured in the November/December 2023 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.