

'Self-Sufficient' Veterans Build Desert Community

An Afghanistan War veteran created a self-sustaining, off-grid desert community to help veterans regain a sense of purpose and healing

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Resting against a foothill some 7,000 feet above sea level on a flat-topped mesa encased by mountains, a small veterans' community lives off-grid in camaraderie near Carson, New Mexico.

Founded in 2017 by Ryan Timmermans, the small, 50-acre desert community sprouted near Carson, about 25 miles west of Taos, New Mexico, to provide veterans with an alternative to the clamor and speed of society.

Timmermans, an Afghanistan War veteran who deployed to Bagram Airfield in 2011-12 with the Army's 340th Tactical Psychological Operations Company out of Garner, North Carolina, purchased the acreage to help veterans like himself regain a sense of purpose.

"I was in trouble mentally when I got back from Afghanistan," said Timmermans, a Raleigh, North Carolina, native who deployed as a soldier and later as a U.S. contractor. "I felt like an alien in my own country, and I know a lot of veterans can relate. On my second deployment to Afghanistan, I realized there was a lot of me that was going back to war because it seemed more comfortable for me. It didn't make sense, but that's how it felt."

Having returned to the U.S. in 2013 to more of the same inner desolation, Timmermans left North Carolina and found himself both homeless for the first time in his life and gripped by persistent suicidal thoughts.

When he sought help to fill the caving abyss that had stolen his meaning in life, Timmermans had an epiphany after a torturous waiting period.

"I scheduled an appointment with the VA, and it was a five-month wait," Timmermans said.

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“It made me worse waiting. Then when I finally went, the doctor said he was a volunteer, and he was running late for a golf tournament. I knew at that point I wasn’t going to get help from the VA. They had people that meant well, but they didn’t have the resources.”

‘IT’S A HOLISTIC APPROACH’

An outdoorsman who had idolized American naturalist Eustace Conway since he was 11 years old, Timmermans gathered everything he had and went west to Taos, the birthplace of Earthships. An autonomous style of architecture, Earthships are designed to behave as passive solar earth shelters made of both natural and upcycled materials.

“You can’t just snap your fingers and have your experiences at war go away,” Timmermans said. “So I thought why not keep our veterans together. I had a love for all natural things, so I thought why not live to help each other and live off-grid in communities together. Why get put on all those medications at the VA and lose yourself in the process. Veterans are capable of so much more.”

Timmermans gathered all his life savings and purchased a 50-acre property on behalf of his nonprofit, Veterans Off-Grid (VOG), in 2017. Since then, VOG has housed more than 40 veterans, helping them restore a sense of purpose, community, sustainability and peace. The nonprofit also implements programs that empower psychological and physical well-being, providing job skills training and entrepreneurship, as well as promoting environmental stewardship.

“It’s a holistic approach used to impart a sense of self-sufficiency, re-establish pride and brotherhood, and help veterans reintegrate back into society from a place of familiarity and strength,” Timmermans said. “If you’re not dependent upon society, society collapsing won’t affect you. You’re self-sufficient and safe. There’s a feeling of accomplishment of being able to feed yourself and build yourself shelter.”

The veterans at VOG live without paying bills or receiving a salary. They work 16-hour weeks to help build self-sustaining homes for themselves and others in Carson, whose population of about 250 residents harbors many low-income families. The veterans also grow their own food, as well as participate in weekly support group sessions.

“I take the heavy military aspect out of it and remove the yelling and forced exercise, and all that kind of stuff,” Timmermans said. “Natural building is exercise, and you’re doing it with a purpose. My philosophy on 16 hours a week is — how do you fix someone who has reached the lowest grade in society to the point they become invisible? They used to be warriors, so how do we get their honor back? That’s through service.”

‘LIKE A PHOENIX RISING FROM THE ASHES’

Among the many veterans who have come through and benefited from VOG is Timmermans’ own father, Terry, a Vietnam War veteran and Life member of VFW Post

10804 in Little River, South Carolina.

“My wife and I are so proud of what Ryan’s accomplished, and for the positive effect he has had on the many veterans who have transitioned through VOG,” Terry Timmermans said. “If we had more people like Ryan, the world would be a better place.”

Another Vietnam War veteran, Richard Cottrell, regained his sense of purpose after a tumultuous stretch of years before finding VOG.

“The past year as a resident-volunteer at VOG has provided me with an opportunity to serve my fellows in need with my hands and my heart,” said Cottrell, who found his way to VOG in 2022 and remains with the community. “Applying my 50 years of construction experience toward VOG has been soul food and mana from heaven for me. I have never felt so fulfilled in my life.”

Cottrell is one of five veterans currently in the community, which is set to be transitional for many veterans. Though they’re encouraged to stay as long as they need, according to Timmermans, the goal is to help heal their emotional wounds through service.

“Like a phoenix rising from the ashes,” Timmermans said. “You help others and begin healing moral injury. VOG gives a way for civilians to give thanks, not with words but with actions. Thank you for your service has become a formality. VOG provides a way to help by acting.

“Carson reminds me of a third-world country, so we’re helping people not be homeless.”

Among those helping lobby on behalf of VOG’s mission are the local VFW Posts in New Mexico, whom Timmermans encourages his resident-volunteers to join.

With local VFW Posts and other organizations helping spread the message in and around Carson and Taos, Timmermans has seen the community embrace the mission.

“Every veteran that comes through here is encouraged to join the VFW because they do a ton of lobbying for us,” Timmermans said. “They help spread our message. They understand that if we have an explosion of homeless veterans, why not this initiative. I build houses for \$3,500. And the government keeps putting restrictions. “They’d rather our veterans live in tents?”

With more than 23 partners to date, which includes the University of New Mexico-Taos and Johnson County Community College in Kansas, VOG’s reach continues to expand into what Timmermans hopes will be a global network of self-sustaining veteran communities.

“Our goal is to have one in every state, and eventually in every country,” Timmermans said.

“I loved sharing and spending time with soldiers from all over the world.

“I’d love to have communities in every country so veterans can move around and share time together without borders.”

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