

# 'This is About Uniting'

## **An Iraq War veteran and VFW member from Minnesota used donations from his local Post to host a series of workshops for inner-city youths in hopes of inspiring a hobby with life-skill possibilities**

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Last year, the idea struck Karl Erickson, who carried it to his VFW Post 246 in Minneapolis for financial help in lifting the idea off the ground.

An ambitious project impacting thousands of kids in and around the Twin Cities, Post 246 quickly voted on funding Erickson's magnum opus: bringing free woodworking and birdwatching workshops to 10,000 inner-city fourth-graders.

"I've always believed that all I can hope to do is dream big, and execute bigger," said Erickson, an Iraq War veteran who deployed twice with the Minnesota Army National Guard in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. "The VFW is a staple in the community here, so who better to help students around the area than our Post."

Erickson came up with the idea following a career transition in September 2022. He had left his job as a physical education teacher at a charter school in St. Paul, Minnesota, and joined a local nonprofit for at-risk youth and young adults.

After more than six years as a teacher in St. Paul, Erickson had grasped that most fourth-graders carry short attention spans if the material lacks interest or novelty, and most of them don't have a hobby that serves as a gateway to life skills. He crafted his project to address both concerns.

Erickson also reached out to more than 200 teachers across the Twin Cities who scheduled his workshop, sending each one surveys for self-administered statistics, which gauged the impact of the experience.

"I wanted to send a pre-workshop survey, and then a post-survey to see if anything had changed among the students," said Erickson, the Program Manager of Woodworking at

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Elpis Enterprises, a nonprofit that provides young adults between 16 and 23 years of age with job training. “Before the workshops, 70 percent of the kids said they didn’t birdwatch. And that has changed tremendously following the workshops.”

Since November, and with help from his colleagues at Elpis and more than \$11,500 from Post 246 to date, Erickson has been able to teach birdwatching and woodworking workshops to more than 2,000 students across 27 schools.

The donations to Elpis help fund staff and a team of at-risk and homeless-impacted interns, who themselves fabricate the birdfeeder kits.

The funds also go toward purchasing additional supplies that include such things as plexiglass, iron rods to hang the birdfeeder, as well as bird seeds that get packed into every student’s completed birdfeeder.

“We go to each school with all of the jigs, hammers, clamps, drills and nails and rotate 20-30 students every 30-40 minutes through the building workshop,” Erickson said. “The goal in all this is to make the kids feel confident, make them feel empowered. They sometimes hold their birdfeeder up after a workshop like they’re holding a \$100 bill in their hand.”

Erickson also has used funding from Post 246 for another ambitious Elpis project, dubbed the Land of 10,000 Urban Ice Anglers, which fields free ice-fishing trips. Elpis, with help from VFW volunteers and others, has sent more than 570 students on ice-fishing excursions to date.

“I coordinate with schools as well as law enforcement, having both the St. Paul Police Department and their Police Activities League police cadets help students go ice fishing,” Erickson said. “They have also helped students in St. Paul schools build their birdfeeders as a way to cultivate better trust with law enforcement.”

As Erickson continues to reach for both goals of teaching 10,000 kids the art of birdwatching and woodworking, as well as ice fishing, respectively, he also wants to encourage members of other VFW Posts to do the same.

“If there are other veterans into this, there are so many opportunities for us veterans to train and work with schools around our communities,” Erickson said. “This is about uniting. Most of the teachers that have responded to me have said they’d like this to be an annual tradition in their classrooms. It’s up to us younger veterans to carry the VFW mission forward.”

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