

Student Veterans Host ‘A Run to Remember’

A 5K run on the University of Kansas campus is organized by veterans, to benefit veterans

Mar 13, 2017

A tradition is building at the University of Kansas. A group of student veterans — many of whom are VFW members — are using their smarts, logistical know-how and passion for running to help their fellow vets.

Specifically, they are leveraging the community’s and the university’s support of the military to raise money for various student-veteran causes.

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Participants in the 2016 KU Veterans Day run jog along Memorial Drive on the campus of the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kan. Student veterans organized the event, which honored Vietnam veterans and raised nearly \$10,000 for a new student veterans center at the school.

Their main fundraiser is the KU Veterans Day Run. Last November, they hosted the eighth such event, and proceeds were used to establish a new student veterans center on campus. The 3,000-square-foot facility opened in January in the school's Summerfield Hall.

The run in November 2016 was the "biggest one so far," according to the event's co-director Randy Masten, assistant director of KU's Office of Graduate Military Programs. It was billed as "A Run to Remember" and dedicated to Vietnam War veterans.

Proceeds also helped support KU's Student Veterans of America chapter and nine scholarships for wounded veterans. Past runs have helped maintain the university's several veterans memorials.

"We felt the money this year would be better used to serve student veterans," said Masten,

an Iraq War veteran and life member of VFW Post 852 in Lawrence.

Masten said the 2016 run featured 329 participants and raised nearly \$10,000.

Masten's fellow event co-director, April Blackmon Strange, is the director of KU's Student Veterans Center. She said the new facility is "a place to go to with questions" that student vets might have about issues like the *Post-9/11 GI Bill*, service-related disabilities, VA benefits, tutors and tuition assistance.

"It's also a place to go if you're looking for people who can provide some camaraderie in a healthy environment," she said. "We don't want our student veterans to feel isolated."

Blackmon Strange, whose husband is a retired Army officer and who describes herself as an "Army brat," served as the USO director at Fort Riley, Kan., from 2008-12. She said that while veterans at KU can often be described as "non-traditional," they still want to experience campus life like their fellow students.

"The more integrated they are into the university, the richer their experience," she said. "Student vets want to enjoy alternative extracurricular activities, like kickball and ultimate Frisbee, as much as anyone else. The challenge at the Student Veterans Center is to recognize the special status and needs of our student vets while blending them into the larger university community."

'Long Tradition' of Vet Support

Known as a vet-friendly school, the University of Kansas, located in Lawrence, Kan., some 65 miles west of Kansas City, Mo., was recently named the 10th best university for veterans by *Military Times*. The publication used criteria such as veterans graduation rates, veterans employment rates and salary levels six years after graduation, existence of a student veterans office and the level of staff and academic support offered to student veterans in compiling a list of the top 125 four-year universities.

Blackmon Strange told KU's student newspaper, *The University Daily Kansan*, in November that 2016 was the second consecutive year the school had earned top 10 status.

"We're definitely very proud," she said. "Our goal is to stay high in those rankings and become a recognized leader for taking care of student veterans and their family members."

Masten agrees.

"There's a long and strong tradition of veterans support on KU's campus," he said.

Masten noted that in 1986 KU became the first university to erect a memorial to Vietnam War veterans on its campus. The 2016 run recognized the 30th anniversary of the memorial's establishment.

The school's Memorial Stadium — home to the football team and graduation ceremonies — honors World War I veterans. A bell tower known as The Campanile, which overlooks the stadium, is a memorial to World War II veterans. The campus also features a memorial to Korean War veterans.

Masten, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, said the race route was selected with those structures in mind.

"We run by the memorials on purpose," he said.

Run Promotes Active Young Veterans

From the beginning, the KU Vets Day Run has enjoyed the support of its area veterans —

specifically members of VFW Post 852 and vets attending college.

“The first run had about 12 people, so it’s pretty amazing to see how it has grown,” said Johnathan Duncan, a life member of Post 852, an Iraq War veteran and a KU graduate of the class of 2013. “I’m happy it is doing exactly what it was intended to do — help veterans and remind the community that veterans today are young, active and willing to continue their service back home.”

Duncan said the first run occurred in 2009 when he was vice president of KU’s Collegiate Veterans of America chapter. That group is the predecessor of today’s Student Veterans of America organization — a group with which VFW established a formal partnership in 2013. Duncan said he organized a “much larger” run in 2010 when he served as the CVA chapter president.

“Our goals were to have active engagement with the community and to create a dialogue between veterans and the community where they live in order to dispel stigma and foster understanding,” said Duncan, who is currently the deputy director of administrative operations at VFW National Headquarters in Kansas City.

“You have to understand that back in 2009 the idea of young veterans returning from war unstable because of PTSD was the predominant belief among most Americans,” Duncan said.

Duncan added that a visible activity like a 5K run was specifically chosen to serve as an “engaging reminder” to the community that veterans are young and productive and “aren’t scary or damaged.”

The run’s youthful vibe can be found at VFW Post 852, too. Based in a college town, Duncan’s and Masten’s Post in Lawrence has a reputation for a young and vibrant membership. Masten said he was drawn to it not long after he arrived on KU’s campus.

“I met VFW members who were students, like [former Post commanders] Dan Parker and Felix Zacharias,” he said. “They were both under 30 and in leadership positions at the Post. It was a lively atmosphere.”

Masten, who is working on his Ph.D. in military history at KU, said that to remain relevant into the future, VFW on the national level must tap into that youthful enthusiasm.

“VFW Posts should link up with SVA chapters,” said Masten, who has been an SVA member for about five years. “If I meet a Jayhawk [KU’s mascot] who is a vet, I’ll ask him or her to join both groups.”

He added that with as large and diverse as VFW’s membership is, Posts should always strive to get their older and younger members engaged together. Masten said that while their generations are different, these vets share bonds that transcend time.

“They are mutually impressed with each other,” he said. “They admire each other’s service.”

Masten noted that at the 2016 run, Vietnam veterans handed out finisher medals to the participants.

“I think it was appropriate,” he said. “It was a great way for our runners to meet the Vietnam veterans. We got so many compliments from people involved that we were honoring their service.”

It should bode well for this budding tradition.

This article is featured in the March 2017 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Tim Dyhouse](#), senior editor, VFW magazine. Photo by Alisa Kay Childress.