

‘This Post is a Community Center’

A VFW Post in “The Natural State” with a rich history of community service celebrated its 100th anniversary in February

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From honoring the legacy of its namesake, Robert Jack, to starting modern initiatives such as a monthly hiking program, a 100-year-old VFW Post in Arkansas continues to carry on Post traditions of community service and fellowship.

Founded on Feb. 13, 1925, VFW Post 1322 in Van Buren, Arkansas, is the oldest VFW Post in the state and in recent years has flourished into a hub for veterans and their families. Van Buren, a suburb of Fort Smith, is in western Arkansas near the Oklahoma state line.

Post 1322 Commander Matthew Hicks said that members focus on community activities, which he said has led to more engagement.

“We’re going into our third year with a project called Operation Daily,” said Hicks, currently a medic with the Army National Guard. “We now have our building open every day. Folks can come in, have a cup of coffee, eat a donut, play some games, watch TV, use one of our computers or have conversations with others. This Post is a community center — not a canteen.”

‘A CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE NATURE’

Hicks said that one of the Post’s priorities is the Hiking for Mental Health program, which was established in 2019. He said it allows veterans to connect with nature and build camaraderie among other hikers. Hicks said that each month, hikers meet at the Post and then carpool to a hiking location.

“Arkansas is under rated when it comes to the beauty of the state,” Hicks said. “We don’t do hard hikes, so people of all ages are welcome to come, even if they are not veterans. We make sure everyone gets a chance to experience nature in their own way and deal with whatever thoughts they have.”

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Other Post 1322 initiatives include donating to the Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots program, flag retirement ceremonies and adopting two Van Buren cemeteries – Gill Cemetery and Gracelawn Cemetery. Volunteers laid nearly 1,000 wreaths at the cemeteries in December.

“Public fundraising campaigns helped us purchase those wreaths,” Hicks said. “We laid them at the headstones of four of the Post’s founding members and all the other service members in those cemeteries.”

‘IT’S AMAZING WHAT THEY’VE DONE’

Hicks attributed the longevity of the Post to its strong community ties and active involvement. He added that if it were not for a few of the Post’s older members “holding it together,” the facility and its contribution to the community would not be here in the present day.

Korean War veteran Robert Layes was one of those members. The Navy veteran, who served aboard the USS Kearsarge (CVA-33), said the Post is a “completely different place” now that younger veterans have joined.

“It’s amazing what they’ve done with the place,” said Layes, who served from 1950 to 1954. “I don’t get to go as much anymore, but I still participate sometimes.”

Layes, 93, added that he appreciates newer members for growing the Post into what it is today.

“I am very proud to be a VFW member,” Layes said. “Our Post has changed for the better, and I’m happy it has.”

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