

Lutheran Church Charities helping raise awareness of veteran suicide

Monthly '22' events provide potential life-saving information

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An average of 22 times a day, a U.S. military veteran commits suicide, according to a recent investigation by the Department of Veterans Affairs. To help raise awareness of veteran suicide, Lutheran Church Charities and its Kare 9 Military Ministry hold "22," an event on the 22nd of every month, at its Northbrook headquarters that invites active military, veterans and their families to gather for dinner, fellowship and an exchange of potentially life-saving information.

On May 22, 40 people participated in a ceremony that included a Presentation of Colors, Pledge of Allegiance, a brats-and-onion-rings dinner, and a performance of patriotic songs by the Arlingtones, an acappella barbershop chorus.

Among the regular attendees at the 22 event was a contingent from American Legion Joseph M. Sesterhenn, Post 166, in Glenview.

Post Commander John Wowk explained the importance of being there.

"There is an understanding that 22 veterans take their lives each day," he said. "The goal is to get it down to zero. It is the passing of the word, the knowledge that we receive from the guest speakers, that provides us more information that we can pass on to others. When we see those who

are in need of help we can give them that information and hopefully turn their lives around."

"You come across any veteran, a veteran knows another veteran, and they're going to talk to each other," Wowk continued. "There is that camaraderie that we have and if there is something wrong, as long as we have the resources where we can send them so they can get help, that is a good thing."

LCC provides some of that help through its Kare 9 Military Ministry, comprised of veterans who serve veterans and their families. Kare 9 Military Ministry dogs and their trained veteran handlers make visits upon request to VFWs, American Legion posts, VA hospitals, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Care Centers, homes of veterans who are home-bound, expos, vet clinics, Yellow Ribbon returning and sendoff ceremonies, and various other activities.

Sometimes, three or four squad members and their Kare 9 dogs will visit a group location, such as a hospital or clinic. The veterans there can be all ages and from conflicts dating back to World War II. A good number are Vietnam veterans who have lost limbs or partial eyesight due to exposure from Agent Orange, a jungle defoliant widely used during the war. Many of the younger veterans suffer from PTSD.

"The veterans love meeting the dogs, they bring an amazing amount of peace and comfort. It is a blessing to see what these dogs will do," said Navy veteran and Kare 9

handler Gene Weisbecker, who takes Brutus to visit with vets almost every day and is a regular attendee at the 22 dinners.

"Suicide is an epidemic, and it would be nice if there was a much higher awareness on national level," said Kare 9 veteran handler Brad Schroeder. "These are guys and gals that fought for their country in whatever war and answered that call, and it is sad that they couldn't get through it."

"We want to bring God's compassion to people, and I think the Kare 9 Ministry facilitates that on a day to day basis," Schroeder continued. He recounted how six handlers and their dogs recently visited with homeless veterans on the South Side. "This is showing the world in a little way that people of faith care for these people."

The 20-minute program also included a Missing Man table ceremony followed by "Taps" and a toast to honor the 83,000 America's POW and MIAs.

"We've got to remember that they are missing and hopefully we will be able to account for them at some time," said U.S. Army veteran Fred Vanstrom. "We've got families who really do not know what happened to their loved ones. It is recognition of the fact that they are still out there."

The table itself is a set with a white tablecloth, "symbolizing the piety of their motives when answering the call," and a red rose displayed in a vase "reminding us of the life of each of those missing," Vanstrom said.

The vase is tied with a

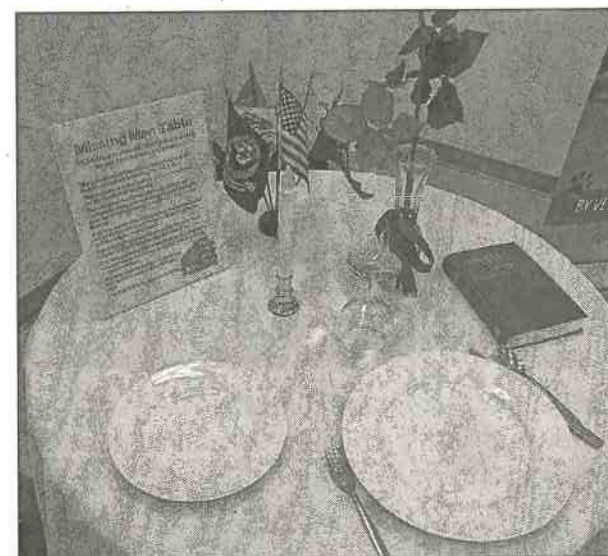


U.S. Navy veterans Gene Weisbecker (left) and Marvin Hanks prepare for a Presentation of Colors at the monthly "22" event, in Northbrook, sponsored by the Lutheran Church Charities Kare 9 Military Ministry that raises awareness of veteran suicide. PHOTOS BY ALAN P. HENRY/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

red ribbon, "symbol of our continued determination to never forget those who gave their last, best measure and to account for our missing." A slice of lemon "reminds us of the bitter fate of those killed in action," a pinch of salt "symbolizes the tears of those missing and their families," the Bible represents "strength gained through faith" and a wine glass is inverted and the chair is empty, symbolizing that they are missing.

LCC staff member, Kare 9 Military Ministry Coordinator, and US Army veteran Jim Morrison noted that the 22 event is not just for veterans.

"We've got a couple of guys who come in who are hurting in other ways," he said. "They might have physical ailments or emotional troubles. I think they come here because this is a safe place; they



A "Missing Man" table is present at each monthly event to showcase concern for the estimated 83,000 American POWs and MIAs.

are accepted, there is no judgement here. It is a good place to be. We offer this for free and anybody can come."

LCC's Kare 9 ministries never charge those they serve and are donor

funded. To learn more about the Kare 9 Military Ministry, if you are a veteran who might benefit from a Kare 9 team visit, or to donate, contact them at (866) 455-6466 or visit www.Kare9.org.