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## 'The best people you're ever going to find'

By Steve B. Brooks - April 30, 2015



Legion Riders Chapter 392 in Panama City, Fla. hold a meeting. The group, and it affiliated post, include dozens of younger, Post-9/11 generation veterans. (Photo by Lucas Carter)

It didn't take much for Paul W. Airey American Legion Post 392 to recruit Air Force Technical Sgt. George Robinson into the post. Word of mouth worked just fine.

While stationed in Italy, Robinson heard about Post 392 and how it was supporting the military community in Panama City, which includes both Tyndall Air Force Base and Naval Support Activity Panama City. That was enough for him when he was stationed at Tyndall.

"What I was told ... is that ... the best people you're ever going to find (are) at that American Legion," said Robinson, 29. "So I was like, 'It sounds like my kind of place.' So I came here and dove headfirst into it."

Robinson's story is one of many similar ones at Post 392, whose membership includes dozens of active-duty military personnel and Post-9/11 veterans. In its first six years of

existence, the post has managed to create an environment of acceptance where young veterans are not only encouraged to join, but also to take on a leadership role.

The post was chartered in 2009 when Legionnaire Mike Kirchoff teamed up with Johnny Matheson, a member of China Post 1, to create an environment more suited to their vision of what a Legion post should be: non-smoking and family friendly.

The members started meeting in restaurants, members' houses and an Elks lodge. They then rented a former gas station and quickly outgrew, remodeling it themselves. But after 18 months, a portion of a former Coca-Cola plant in the area came up for sale. A series of fortuitous events allowed the post members to purchase the building.

After purchasing the facility, a Legion family effort helped transform it into the impressive home it is today. Members helped remodel the inside and build a beautiful outdoor area that includes tables and a fire pit, and the community stepped forward, donating labor and materials when necessary.

The facility is exactly what Kirchoff, a Paid-Up-For-Life Legion member who retired after a 38-year Air Force career, envisioned when he and others started the post.

"When you walk in that door somebody says 'hi' to you," Kirchoff said. "When you walk in that door twice, somebody remembers your name. And being family oriented and family friendly has increased our membership. You can bring your children down here and you know they're safe."

Those still serving in the military aren't just social members. The active-duty members of the post recently cooked and served a meal for their fellow members during a Vietnam veterans welcome-home ceremony. And some stationed overseas have even maintained their Post 392 membership.

Robinson said Post 392 gives him something he was lacking before joining. "Being stationed overseas, there's a level of camaraderie that I haven't found in the States," he said. "Coming (to Post 392) brought it all back together. I know that right now, if I needed something, anybody in this post would step up to help me, without question. They would be there. These are the best people I've ever met."

Those sentiments are shared by several other active-duty members of the post:

- "I'm hanging out with guys who are 65, 70, and I'm talking to them just like an equal, a peer," said Staff Sgt. Joshua Bragg, 37, and a charter member of the post. "You gain a lot of experiences, a lot of life lessons that I might have learned the hard way I got for free ... at the Legion."
- "It's the camaraderie the older dudes have with the younger guys," said Technical Sgt. Ryan McGee, 33. "They accepted me with open arms the first night. I try to recruit people into here all the time."
- "This is my family," said post historian and Technical Sgt. Mike Peters, 34. "I like coming down here, shooting the breeze with my friends, family. Having family here, being a part of this post, being able to come here ... and kind of unwind ... it does make it easier, being active duty and being away from (family)." Technical Sgt. Jeremy

Graves, 30, was signed up in the Department of Pennsylvania Legion by his parents while he was deployed to Iraq. The post sent care packages and letters to Graves and his fellow airmen. Now stationed at Tyndall, he transferred his membership to Post 392. "There's definitely an outreach to military in the area, and (I) definitely feel if anything was needed, there's always someone there that has your back or offer that support," he said.

That's Post 392's goal, said Commander Joe Keyes, who retired from the Air Force in 2006. "The camaraderie you lose when you retire from the military ... it really changes," he said. "You're just a normal Joe. But this place, coming down and talking to all the other veterans – they understand what you're talking about. They get it. It's really easy to talk to them."

Getting younger veterans, and those still serving, to join is "key and elemental," said John D. Lincoln III, a 27-year member of the Legion who transferred his membership into 392. Fellow post member Jon Jaillite, 45, agreed.

"(The younger members are) the ones who are going to get the word out to the ones that are up-and-coming to join the Legion," Jaillite said. "These kids are the ones who are going to get the active-duty members involved with us and the community. "

Alex Hill, who served in the Air Force from 2003 to 2007, admits he didn't know "a damn thing" about the Legion before joining in 2010. Now he's assistant director of Post 392's Riders. He said he's led multiple Rider meetings and headed up the chapter's biggest charity event.

"I asked what I could do to help," said Hill, 31. "That was one of the things about the Riders group. Whenever I asked what I could do to help, they'd say, 'Well, we don't have a sergeant-at arms. Do you want to do that? Do this, this and this.' I was like, 'All right, I'll do this.' From then on, it's been amazing. I've never been a leader until I joined the post. This is something I want. I want to continue giving to veterans."

The Riders have been a big recruiting tool for the post. Many of the younger members joined because of the Riders and then learned more about the Legion. And they're also one of the faces of the organization, Hill said. "We're walking billboards," he said. "And I've been riding (motorcycles) since 2006, and I've never found a group of people that I absolutely love to ride with, love to hang out with, (like this)."

The mix of young and old has helped Post 392 already exceed 100 percent of its membership goal for this year; it currently has nearly 700 combined members of the Legion, American Legion Auxiliary and Sons of The American Legion. Among those are more than 150 Legion Riders, making it the largest chapter in the Department of Florida.

The post stays active, raising more than \$281,000 for various charities in the past 11 months. And when things need done at the post, it's a family effort. SAL Commander Jim Call beamed when talking about the SAL squadron's contributions to the outdoor area.

That family environment extends beyond the post members to their actual families. Legion Riders Chapter Director Danny Davis, a charter member of Post 392, said social

media has helped the post grow – and provides a way to communicate. One member is a contractor in Afghanistan; his wife and daughter are in Panama City. "She puts on Facebook, 'My lawnmower tire's broke,'" Davis said. "Guess what? There's 200 people looking at it, and somebody's going to fix that tire. Social media is a big deal with that."

Bragg said he never hesitates using the traditional word of mouth to sell the Legion. "Nineteen-year-olds, brand new to the military, when they talk to me – squadron leadership – I can tell them everything in the world," he said. "But they're like 'Yeah, but you're the man, you're the boss.' But when they go to (Post 392) and hear it from retirees, a lot of times they take advice more seriously. And it's good for them to network, too.

"I highly encourage all my young guys (to join). A lot of them, I'll tell them, 'I'll pay your first year's dues if you go check this out, because you're going to make a lot of great friends, (and) you may learn more about the Air Force than you would on your own. And at the end of the day, I say, 'These people are going to take care of you.'"

Providing that type of mentoring has encouraged younger members to join. But at the end of the day, it's the membership that makes Post 392 the success it has become. "You find this kind of post once in a lifetime," said Post Chaplain P.T. Moore, who retired from the Navy in 2003. "We have it. And we've been keeping it that way."

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