'Tying Two Generations of Veterans Together'

An equipped and wheelchair-accessible van connected two generations of VFW veterans as an example of how 'paying it forward' exemplifies the VFW spirit

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The call came in shortly after Jason Johns had been elected VFW's Department of Wisconsin commander in June of last year.

The somewhat familiar voice on the other end was Marilyn Grau, who offered Johns an opportunity to impact the life of a fellow veteran.

The opportunity came in the form of a cherry-colored 2018 Chrysler Pacifica minivan equipped with full accommodations for use by any disabled driver. VA had provided the vehicle to Marilyn's husband, the late Vietnam veteran Lonnie Grau.

Lonnie, who was wheelchair-bound due to complications from surgery in 2006, had passed away in March 2020 due to Agent Orange-related causes.

"Marilyn's late husband was the uncle of a great friend of mine," Johns said. "When she asked if I could help her find a disabled veteran in the state who could truly benefit from the same independence and freedom that Lonnie got from this van, I made it a personal priority mission to see that the VFW was able to do so."

Johns, an Army veteran and Purple Heart recipient who deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003-04, asked Marilyn Grau to donate the van to the Wisconsin VFW Foundation, where he planned to put out a notice to start accepting applications from disabled veterans.

Over the course of a year, Johns spearheaded a barnstorming campaign that included stops at VFW Posts and other veteran organization facilities in Wisconsin to showcase and

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promote Lonnie's van.

"The goal was to gift it on Veterans Day last year, but COVID-19 blew up again," Johns said. "So we eventually delayed the application deadline a couple of times and ended up extending it to Memorial Day to gift it at the state convention this year."

Once the deadline arrived on Memorial Day, Johns, now immediate-past Department commander, joined two other judges in reviewing more than 30 applicants who had met the criteria.

"Of course we had more applicants, but we didn't think they were quite eligible," Johns added. "Being a VFW member wasn't a requirement, but it was nice to know our winner turned out to be a Life member."

'I STILL FEEL A SENSE OF CAMARADERIE'

In front of thousands of VFW members during Wisconsin's 100th annual Department convention on June 25 in Green Bay, Johns and Marilyn Grau presented Lonnie's van to Iraq War veteran and double-amputee Alan Lewis of Milwaukee.

"The support that I have received from the veteran community has been exceptional," said Lewis, 42, a Purple Heart recipient and life member of VFW Post 12100 in Milwaukee. "Receiving this wonderful gift of Lonnie's van is a great example of how no one does more for veterans than the VFW."

On July 16, 2003, while serving with the Army's 3rd Inf. Div., in Baghdad, Lewis was conducting a patrol mission when the Humvee he was driving hit an anti-tank landmine.

Lewis suffered severe facial and body burns, damage to his left eye, a fractured left forearm and severe lower body injuries that required the amputation of both his legs.

Upon returning stateside to recover at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Lewis met a fellow Iraq War veteran and double amputee who introduced him to adaptive sports.

In the past 15 years, Lewis's competitive nature and need for camaraderie has led him toward a decorated career in adaptive sports, competing nationally in wheelchair lacrosse, basketball, hand-cycling, snowboarding and weightlifting. Lewis also is a long-standing member of the Wounded Warriors Amputee football team in Milwaukee.

"When you come home from Iraq, you feel a loss because you lack the camaraderie you once felt with your company," Lewis said. "At these events, although these men and women aren't necessarily the ones I fought with, I still feel a sense of camaraderie among veterans who can relate to my situation. Being competitive is important, but having fun also makes it even

better."

In gratitude, Lewis vouched to use Lonnie's van not only for his own personal independence, but to help transport fellow teammates to wheelchair sporting events.

"At the gifting, no sooner than he received the keys, he told the crowd that he was looking to start coaching and would be paying it forward to other veterans by getting them involved and transporting as well," Johns added. "The fact that he was putting others first was a sure sign we had made the right choice."

Lewis's compassion and selflessness also made an impression on Marilyn Grau, who spent more than 20 minutes after the event giving the Iraq War veteran a guided tour of her late husband's tuned-up van.

"Marilyn said a few words, and hearing Alan and speaking with him and his family, she knew right away that Lonnie's van was in good hands," Johns said. "It really felt like the passing of the van was tying two generations of veterans together."

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