

EGGERS: Former Blazer Dancers enlist in Vets 4 Vets

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'Tis the season where giving is foremost in the minds of a lot of caring people.

It's with that spirit that Sunday's "Vets 4 Vets" holiday visit to the Portland VA Medical Center is born.

The first part of the group's handle is a bit of a misnomer. The former members of the Trail Blazers' dance team range from their late 20's to late 30's, hardly old enough to qualify as veterans -- except in the parlance of professional sports, and perhaps, professional dancing.

This band of retired ol' gals -- I say this affectionately, of course -- has turned our country's military veterans into their special project.

"Vets 4 Vets" debuted in 2011 and since then has made about 15 visits to veterans hospitals, care centers and military bases in the Northwest, speaking with men and women whose service to the country sometimes gets forgotten.

"I feel privileged to be able to talk to them and hear what they've done," says Wisa Opton, 39, a West Linn High and Portland State grad who lives in Salem. "For them, it's nice to talk about the things they experienced -- some of those experiences, that is. It's good for them to be able to talk about the cool things they did, the happy memories."

The group was organized by John Curry, 56, a cameraman at Blazer games for 30 years and a man who served in some capacity with the U.S. Navy from 1976 to 2008. Over the years, one of the extra responsibilities of the Blazer Dancers has been volunteer work. Curry had shot footage of a show the Blazer dancers performed for U.S. troops in Fort Hood, Texas, in 2003.

"When we got back, (then-Blazer dance coach) Dee Dee Anderson called and asked if there were anything they could do locally," Curry says.

Curry put together a visit to the VA Medical Center, which became a regular endeavor of the Blazer dance team.

In 2011, Curry called Opton -- a member of the Blazer Dancers from 1993-96 -- with the notion of creating a group of former Blazer dancers to visit with local veterans.

"I loved the idea," Opton says. "One thing I missed about being on the (Blazer dance) team was doing volunteer work, specifically visiting hospitals. And it was a chance to get everyone together and do something as a team again."

Curry and Opton put together a group of about 15 former Blazer dancers who wanted to help.

"We all have a soft spot in our hearts for service men and women," Opton says. "It's a really good way to give back to the community and to visit and meet some really neat people."

Over the past two years, with Curry's organizational work, "Vets 4 Vets" has made its presence felt at hospitals, care centers and veterans-related events. Curry, Opton, Desiree Goode and Amy Friendly form the group's board of directors.

Opton, who has also been a member of the dance squads for the Arena Football Forest Dragons, the WNBA Fire, the National Lacrosse League LumberJax and the Blazers' Hip-Hop Squad, calls herself the "Crash Davis of sports dance teams in Portland."



by: TRIBUNE PHOTO - Wisa Opton is one of several former Blazer Dancers who will visit the Portland VA Medical Center as part of the Vets 4 Vets program.

When she first pondered the idea of visiting veterans, "I was like, 'Nobody cares about a bunch of over-the-hill moms who are coming in to say hi,'" she says. "I was a little doubtful they would care, but I was wrong. We've gotten a great response. They are very appreciative that we would take the time to thank them for their service to our country. They say, 'This means a lot to us.'"

The women wear camouflage-style "Vets 4 Vets" T-shirts on their visits to meet with the veterans, speaking with people who have served from World War II, Korea, Vietnam and more recent wars and conflicts.

"I have a soft spot for the older guys, the World War II vets or the men who served in Korea," Opton says. "We're losing a lot of them every day. I have loved meeting them and hearing their stories. It absolutely blows me away that these guys were such young kids, and the things they did in the war. We can't even fathom what they dealt with. I've heard some of the most amazing stories.

"The other thing that stands out is when we talk to Vietnam War vets, who are just getting recognition now. It's heartbreaking to talk to some of these guys. On our first visit to the Portland VA Medical Center (in 2011), I told this gentleman who was a Vietnam War vet, 'We're just here to say thank you for what you did for our country.' He started crying and said, 'You are one of the first people to tell me that.'"

The "Vets 4 Vets" made an appearance at the military mall at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Fort Lewis, Wash., meeting with family members and children of service men and women. They did a grand opening at Fort Withycombe in Clackamas. Several of them participated in a five-kilometer run, with proceeds going to the "Wounded Warrior Project."

"I've gotten to sit in the cockpit of a Chinook helicopter," Opton says. "I've put on a helmet with night-vision goggles. I've put on a backpack that weighs 60 pounds. I spoke with a World War II vet who, when he was 19, flew reconnaissance over China for mapping purposes. It's been a really interesting experience for me, and for all of us."

The veterans look forward to the visits, says Anne Marie Murphy, outreach coordinator for the Portland VA Medical Center.

"The women are so wonderful," Murphy says. "It's one thing just to visit our veterans. But they are just sweet and nice people, with great personalities. They talk to the veterans, take pictures, sign posters. We appreciate that they think of the veterans, and the guys just love them. It really makes their day."

So far, "Vets 4 Vets" have been there just to speak with the veterans and family members. They would like to do more.

"We haven't put together a dance production," Opton says. "That's one of our goals. We'd like to perform."

Everything the "Vets 4 Vets" group has done as been out of pocket. They are in the process of fund-raising and finding sponsors so they can do more.

"We'd like to give care packages to families of service men and women who are overseas," Opton says.

All "Vets 4 Vets" needs to do more is donations and sponsorship. Those interested can visit their Facebook page (Vets 4 Vets) or their website (vets4vetsnw.com).

I think it's a great cause. So does Opton, who says she has gotten back as much as she has given.

"Some of the most gracious people I've ever met are veterans and their families," she says. "It's been just a pleasure -- a really rewarding experience for all of us."

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