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Team helps veterans make transition

Team Red White and Blue creates communities and resources for former military members

By Amber Ambrose | February 19, 2013

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Photo By Courtesy Team RWB

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The wheelchair division in Team Red White and Blue's annual Veterans Day race prepares to leave the start line.



More Information

How to help

1 To volunteer with Team Red White and Blue or to attend any of its events, visit teamrwb.org and check the "Get Involved" section. Information about volunteering or participating in Team RWB's annual November Veterans Day race is

Chris Widell knows what combat feels like. He knows what it feels like to lose a fellow soldier. He knows what it's like to transition from military life to civilian life. He knows that transition is never easy, but he also knows helpful resources are available.

One of those resources is the national nonprofit Team Red White and Blue, founded in 2010. Its youthfulness belies its success in creating communities for veterans

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through group activities in 27 chapters throughout the United States. Houston's chapter is the second oldest in the not-yet-3-year-old organization, and is led by Widell, who acts as the voluntary chapter captain when he's not

at his day job as a senior reservoir engineer at Anadarko.

Team Red White and Blue has nearly 2,000 volunteers - both civilians and veterans - and assists almost 4,000 veterans. The organization employs only three people in executive functions (all veterans themselves), leaving the rest of the leadership to volunteers such as Widell, who spends a minimum of 10 hours a week tending to his charitable duties.

A veteran himself, Widell's drive to help comes from his experiences during two tours in Iraq and watching a close friend and fellow soldier self-destruct, dying from an overdose after returning from combat.

"It's just a real sad story, and when I think about Team Red White and Blue and if it had been around in 2005, or if people in his community or his friends had known things were going wrong and shown interest, maybe he'd still be around today," Widell says. "Team Red White and Blue does create a network where we host social events where people can actually get to know each other."

Social outings include meet-ups at the Children's **Museum of Houston**, the **Houston Zoo** and an upcoming annual shark fishing expedition near Crystal Beach, all occurring often enough for members to build trust and friendships.

The activities Team Red White and Blue promotes the most are athletic events.

"One of our hallmarks is 'P.T. not pills' - physical training - that's what 'P.T.' is for military folks," Widell says. "There is tremendous support for wounded veterans, but there's an enormous population of veterans who suffer from invisible wounds - traumatic brain injury, (post-traumatic stress disorder), depression and survivor's remorse - a lot of those guys and gals need options for treatment."

That "treatment" involves not only by physical well-being, but also the emotional benefits that can be found in group settings. That esprit de corps, which many veterans lose when they leave the military, provides an even "greater effect in combating physical and emotional wounds of war," Widell says.

Group events range from bike rides such as the MS 150, a two-day bike ride from Houston to Austin, the **Chevron Houston Marathon**, a Veterans Day race in The Woodlands founded by Widell, running groups and the **Texas Independence Relay**, a 200-mile race from Gonzales to Houston. That doesn't include all the training that precedes each event.

The activities are funded by grants and donations from large corporations such as Widell's employer, Anadarko, as well as TransOcean, which is underwriting Team Red White and Blue's MS 150 team this year, and others. The athletic events also attract individual donations to the organization.

"A lot of the funds we raise are from individuals who run a race and do a local fundraising page," Widell says. "We have a lot of success here in Texas because it's such a patriotic state, and there's a lot of military here."

Widell says veterans benefit, whether they are participating in Team RWB events or volunteering at them.

"But it's not like we're babying veterans or saying, 'What you need is this, what you need is that.' What we're saying is: 'What you need is community, and by the way, we'd like you to join us.'"

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By Amber Ambrose

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