

Destination Rhode Island

The Ocean State may be the smallest in the U.S., but it offers a plethora of VFW Posts doing great things

Jan 09, 2025

As VFW continues its year-long 125th anniversary celebration, VFW magazine visited Rhode Island in October to highlight four VFW Posts for the “Destination Post Series.” The four featured “Ocean State” VFW Posts were chosen because of the positive impact each has on the communities in which the Posts are located.

‘OUR FOCUS IS SERVICE’

On a Monday in October, members of VFW Post 406 gathered on a clear, crisp fall evening on the lawn of the Elks Lodge just steps from the famous Newport, Rhode Island. mansions. That evening, Post Commander Anselm Richards was stopped by a Boy Scout who was heading inside to his meeting. The youth wanted to thank Richards for his service. In turn, Richards presented him with a challenge coin and chatted with him for a few minutes. Turns out, the scout’s dad is a student at the nearby Naval War College.

“Our Post membership is younger and vibrant,” said Richards, an Army veteran who served in Ramadi, Iraq in 2005-2006. “We are [military] officer heavy because of the war college.”

Richards said Post 406 is comprised of former military officers and senior enlisted, making them natural self-starters.

“If I need something done, I turn to Joe, who is a Newport native,” Richards said of Post Junior Vice Commander Joe Kaiser.

Kaiser, a former Army command sergeant major, served in Baghdad from 2005-2006. “Our focus is service,” Kaiser said. “I like to reinforce to veterans how much good they can still do.”

In addition to the Post’s participation in VFW programs, members keep an eye on veterans needing a hand up. For example, when one of the Post’s two female vets lost her apartment to a fire, the Post provided her with funds and helped her sift through the remains of her apartment to gather her belongings.

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A partnership which the Post is proud of is its work with Gold Star Sailing camps for Gold Star teens. Gold Star Sailing was founded by retired Army colonel Patrick Powers.

In 2012, Powers started Gold Star Sailing to mentor Gold Star teenagers with a focus on leadership, teamwork and adventure.

VFW Department of Rhode Island Commander Mark Turner, also a member of Post 406, said it means a lot to support the Gold Star teens.

“We know hard,” Turner said. “We are talking with kids who know hard.”

In support of the camp, the Post partners with the Newport Gulls, a collegiate summer baseball league, in a 50-50 raffle during the 7th inning stretch. Post members work the stands selling raffle chances.

Richards said the last winner donated the winnings back to the Gold Star Sailing Foundation.

‘VFW IS A CALLING’

While Post 406 is a beacon in the Newport community, it has not always been so. Members sold the Post home in 1984. Then, in 2018, with a handful of members left on its roster, the Post experienced a rebirth. It helped sponsor the Vietnam Traveling Wall, which according to Turner, was a turning point for the Post.

“It was one of the most moving events I have ever seen,” Turner said. “The Post was on its last leg. We went from like four members to 63 today.”

Another community endeavor implemented by the Post involved Island Cemetery in the heart of Newport. Post Adjutant Paul Radion is credited with creating a map showing veterans’ graves within the cemetery. The goal was to make flagging the graves on holidays more efficient and more inclusive.

Radion, an Army vet who served in Baghdad twice, said Post members went from placing 400 U.S. flags to now 1,300. He engages community youth groups to help with the placement of flags.

“To be successful, we have to integrate the community,” Radion said. “Providing leadership in the community is a key component to VFW.”

Incidentally, the cemetery is the resting place of two German soldiers whose bodies were recovered from a submarine sunk during WWII near Newport. Each year, those two soldiers are remembered.

According to Turner, each Memorial Day, the community comes together at an area of Newport known as “The Point” neighborhood. The gathering commemorates those who have lost their lives at sea.

Those in attendance are given a flower to drop into the water, known as the “strewing of the flowers.” Once the strewing is complete, a water cannonade occurs.

Post members agree that not having their own building is a bonus. They hold their monthly meetings and other events at the Elks Lodge in the center of Newport.

“It is a blessing we do not have our own Post home,” said Dean Fraioli, a retired Army lieutenant colonel. “We are forced to go out in the community and engage.”

Fraioli is charged with running the VFW “Buddy”[®] Poppy program. He has static Poppy displays in about 10 locations around town — locations where veterans frequently visit, such as barbershops. The displays have a history of the VFW Buddy Poppy and offer poppies with a place to request a donation.

Vietnam War veteran Bill Farrell said the Post donates coats to veterans at the local senior center. He is a member of the Newport Artillery Company, which also has its own armory at which the Post has held past events.

“I joined the VFW in 1972,” Farrell said. “We’ve done more here in the last five years than all my years before in the VFW.”

The Post is especially proud of its speaker series. With the Naval War College in Newport, the speaker pool is deep. Topics range from the war in Ukraine and global warming to WWII-era Japanese internment camps in California. Local authors are often speakers, which proves popular within the community.

“The VFW is a calling,” Kaiser said. “We have a huge impact on the community. And the opportunity to help families is the best recruiting tool.”

‘PEOPLE LOVE TO SUPPORT THE VFW’

Located in the small, eclectic neighborhood of Common Fence Point in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, is the revitalized VFW Post 5390. Under the direction of Post Commander Ken Rutter, the Post is flourishing.

“We are the go-to place for residents in this neighborhood,” Rutter said. “We have something going on here all the time, it seems.”

Indeed, a visit to the Post revealed a packed house as members of the Post and its Auxiliary packed kits for homeless veterans. A bustling assembly line was working to place the

essentials into bags. This was followed by trivia night, as the door was revolving with people stopping on their way home from work.

If member Louis DiCarlo happens to be at the Post, he will recite all the state's capitals for you and may name the motto of each state. He is a wealth of knowledge that surely comes in handy on those trivia nights.

"I really enjoy the people here the most," said DiCarlo, an Air Force vet who served in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. "And we always have something happening here."

Until 2023 when the Post had its grand reopening on Veterans Day, it was in a state of disrepair. According to Post Senior Vice Commander Vic Schaefer, the Post is now considered a community hub.

"A highlight of the rededication was the renovation and rededication of the canteen in honor of Staff Sgt. Christopher Potts, a local Iraq War hero who sacrificed his life 20 years ago," Schaefer said. "This tribute ensures Staff Sgt. Potts' legacy is woven into the fabric of our community."

Quartermaster Tim Cathcart moved to the area in 2017 and quickly found a home.

"The VFW and Auxiliary treat special needs people very well," said Cathcart, whose daughter became disabled after a car accident when she was a child. "We are truly a community base."

Cathcart has been in conversations with Yoga for Vets, hoping to offer it at the Post. Currently, Pilates classes are held at the Post. Various groups rent out space at the Post for events to include Coast Guard certification.

The Auxiliary is a key component to the success of the Post, as most VFW members there will say. The Post Auxiliary president is Shauna Jamieson, and she is married to the Auxiliary's Department senior vice president, Scott Jamieson. The Department president, Stephen Doherty, also is a member of the Post.

The Jamiesons are believed to be the Post's first married Auxiliary couple. Scott is in charge of a partnership between the Post and Auxiliary and St. Pauly Textile in New York. A shed placed on the Post's property is used to collect gently used clothing items to be recycled by St. Pauly.

Weekly, a truck comes to load up the clothes. Once a month, the Post receives a direct deposit from the organization averaging \$150-\$200.

"This is really something every VFW could be doing," Scott said. "This is truly one of the

best partnerships. People love to support the VFW.”

Schaefer concurs with the sentiment, adding that collaborative partnerships with local organizations is part of what makes Post 5390 special.

