



VFP CHAPTERS NEWSLETTER

WHAT WE'RE DOING FOR WHOM AND HOW

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Two weeks ago I fired up a website (WALKING WITH OTHERS - <http://www.another-veteran-waging-peace.com>). In it I posed a question:

Only a relatively few people have the emotional make-up to become on-the-line activists. Most of us who believe in working for peace and justice and equality of opportunity would like to do something, but are uncertain about what that might be. We would like to be part of a community that stands for our beliefs. We want to be useful. We want to be respected.

What are the ways those of us who do not, or can not, parade and demonstrate may support the causes we believe in? i.e. Letters of encouragement? Phone calls in support of events? Volunteering to do research? I will be very interested in any responses.

I was very pleased to receive some very thoughtful responses which I will share with all you chapter leaders. Take what you wish and come back with your own ideas. Post them on the website and we will continue this dialogue.

I will begin with a contribution by Jerry Steele, a Vietnam veteran who has been devoting the last year to re-vitalizing the Kansas contingent I chose it because it was the most comprehensive and, at the same time, specific. His comments:

I have read your message several times and agree with your observations. In fact, my experiences in trying to re-establish the KC chapter have brought forth many of the same questions as you pose: what can we offer people who share our values, but who are either worn out and beat down by years of activism, or, others who share our passion for peace but simply aren't of the personality type that allows engagement in actions? I have come to believe there are more in the second category than in the first. I can't tell you how many times I have heard the refrain, "Standing on street corners holding signs does no good, no one cares," or "we are so outnumbered that any actions we do are either ignored, ridiculed, and/or not covered by the press anyway."

So, your query is certainly valid, Woody. Here are some suggestions I will make at the next Chapter 97 meeting:

1. Create reading groups, possibly choosing one book every two months. Choose books that will both engage emotionally and intellectually, hopefully leading to more activism by members. Have a set-aside time at the meetings for the group to meet, unless of course they decide to do it on their own time.

2. Have movie nights with refreshments with follow-up dialogue, possibly inviting special guests with expertise on the same topic. Choose relevant topics - each chapter could create its own

book and film resource library so it would have a working resource center to provide to others. I have loaned many materials to area teachers: they deeply appreciate it, and they do not forget where it came from - Jerry Steele, VFP. I'm not important, but I always tell them who I am associated with - that is important.

3. Have chapter engage with some community event, but without any overt display of VFP anti-war / peace politics. Simply be there to help and/or contribute in a completely apolitical way. If someone tries to engage in a negative way, just say we are here to help - not talk politics - I think that might have a huge impact and also give those who don't wish to do actions the opportunity to be 'out front' and actively engaged in a non confrontational, yet helpful and visible manner.

4. Try to network with other vet organizations. Milwaukee has been very successful at this. We tried it with the local VFW and got completely shut out - but at least we made the attempt. They allowed us to make a presentation, there was absolutely no follow-up, no questions from the membership, absolutely no response at all - BUT WE TRIED.

5. Educating others to the real costs of war. Many folks who don't want or like the confrontation of actions can really get into the intellectual realm of the movement. We need more people to visit with kids and teachers - I have said this since 2006. Find sympathetic people, gain an entrance into a system, start slowly and professionally, and build momentum.

6. Each chapter should have an annual 'fun day.' Just get together, play music, tell stories, invite special guests, pick a special place for the event (within reason as many vets seem to be economically at risk).

7. Have letter writing campaigns - those who are more reserved, but still have the passion could certainly be employed in the activity.

8. Adopt a Highway program - positive, visible, apolitical, exercise! Lots of folks would do this that would not agitate in any other way. Plus - we would get a highway sign with our name on it.

9. More reserved members could orchestrate Peace Essay contests with schools in their areas. Totally positive, give rewards to winners, acknowledge all participants, hand out VFP logo / lit as part of the program. Start small - think big.

I believe you have correctly identified a problem that has plagued VFP for a long time. There are grunts, and there are battery clerks - that is just life. They both perform a function. It is the system's job to create the description for each in order to maximize efficiency - that is what you are talking about. How do we take the greatest advantage of all the talents of our members??? If we can find the answer - we maintain membership. If we don't, we go fishing . . .

Bob (no other identification):

One way is assisting the victims of our country's aggression, bonding, as you've done, with our "enemies". I've been fortunate to be able to help the Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Tour, delegations of Vietnamese victims of our chemical warfare, as they've traveled our country seeking justice. It's quite rewarding.

Jerry Genesisio – founder of Veterans For Peace

It's been part of VFP's group dialog from the beginning. Judy and I have done a lot of marching and protesting, but we were always much more comfortable engaged in more productive actions. Protest is a bit like prayer in the sense that it's not enough. If we want a situation to change, we actually have to do something about it.

Mike Ferner – current President of VFP

1) Talking with people outside of the choir. Don't get me wrong, the choir is important and needs to stay motivated and active, but we need more. Speak at civic, labor and church groups. Sounds mundane, but not only is it important, it takes gobs of time to set up the appearances. Either presenting or scheduling are important tasks.

2) Money. If more people with means (and I don't mean fat cats necessarily, but living comfortably and with good intentions) would take seriously the need for funding the activism they speak so highly of. I'm not talking about people like you and Jerry who've administered organizations and know about the funding need. I'm talking about the doctor I spoke with recently about my trip to Vietnam, told her politely yet firmly that there are people who make time in their lives for such activities who'd like to do more if they had assistance from people with good hearts who are too busy or just not inclined to do the more obvious activism. Even specifically mentioned VFP as one place I was talking about. All I got was the too-frequent smile, thanks, pat on the back business.

I don't want to be thanked, damn it, I want people like her to think of what they've done, what they could do, and seriously ask themselves "is there something else I can do be doing?" Next time I'll extend the conversation that little bit more--ask the good doctor (and similar folks) "I know you're heart is in the right place on this...have you really thought about what you've been doing about it and what you might be able to do?"

Paul Appell – VFP member in Peoria

Since I read my papers on-line, writing letters to the editor is an activity that fits my schedule. Judging from some of the responses, it is also a way to reach those not in the same choir as me. Is pinko commie a positive comment? It has been reported that the letters to the editor section is the most widely read part of the paper. I also benefit from shared e-mail groups that forward articles etc to keep informed.

I am currently reading Paul Rogat Loeb's recent update to his 1999 book "Soul of a Citizen." It provides many examples and reasons to be an activist-especially in challenging times when things look hopeless. Loeb points out that we all are responsible as members of society to speak and act out. The cost of silence is greater than the cost of speaking out. This responsibility is especially great with the few who have been to war.