

# NONPROFIT SPOTLIGHT: Volunteers are lifeblood of Military Heritage Museum

Sue Wade, Daily Sun, 2/23/2022

Punta Gorda's Military Heritage Museum is more than a museum.

As steward of the country's rich military heritage, it is an education-centered institution that works directly with local schools, universities and other organizations to offer interactive learning experiences to students of all ages.

It is also a performing arts center that, through live performances in its Gulf Theater, provides moving experiences using theater, music and documentaries.

The museum is also a community gathering place, hosting many other organizations that use the museum to reach out to their constituents and directly serving veterans' needs through hosting and sponsoring veterans' support organizations.

Most importantly, however, the museum is home to nearly 200 veteran and civilian volunteers. They come from diverse backgrounds and geographies yet join together as museum guides and ambassadors dedicated to sharing the many stories found throughout the museum, including their own.



On her way home to Miami for the holidays, University of Alabama psychology major Malka Trujillo followed a highway sign to the Military Heritage Museum, drawn there by her interest in helping veterans.

Before she knew it, she'd survived crashing a plane — fortunately, on the museum's flight simulator.

"I'm very impressed with the volunteers here," she said. "Even though I crashed, they didn't stop teaching me what to do."

Her flight instructor was Bob Wollitz, 92, who flew the first B-29 combat missions in the Korean War.

Interactions like theirs happen every day in this place where young visitors learn history from those who lived it and where older visitors meet others with whom they share a history.

As volunteer Ron Suci put it, “Combat veterans, like most of us volunteers, understand.”

U.S. Marine Dan Hanks describes the volunteer experience as a brotherhood like that of the service.

“And if I hadn’t volunteered here after moving down three years ago,” he said, “I still wouldn’t know a soul in town.”

Diane Lowy of Punta Gorda Isles said, “My husband’s an Army veteran and tries to support veterans’ causes to give back. Last summer, when he didn’t have much to do, I told him about an ad for veteran volunteers that I’d seen in the paper.”

Today, Larry Lowy works in the museum’s library once a week, helping trace veterans’ lineage — where they were stationed, what ship they were on. Diane, not a veteran, tends the museum’s Ship’s Store once a week.

“They need everybody now, veterans or not, as volunteers,” she explained.

Stephen Valdes — a veteran of the Navy, Air Force, National Guard and Army, a self-described “special projects guy” and Conquistador — is working on a Military Trail map project and has preserved many artifacts in this museum where there’s hardly an inch of space where visitors can’t touch something. Or be touched by it.



Docent Roger Peterson — whose brother Ronald, an Army veteran, started volunteering before him — gives guided tours through U.S. war exhibits from the revolution through the Gulf War.

Visitors have been known to break down emotionally while going through the exhibits, Peterson said, and guides do their best to comfort them.

Resident historian Ron Suci, Ph.D., 80, a volunteer who’s in the library every day, served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam, has two Purple Hearts and three master’s degrees, was an Ohio police officer, and taught college history for 19 years.

“This complements the academic side of my life,” said Suci, an eloquent published and oral storyteller, as well as a friendly face.

Coordinator of Volunteer Services Frantz Brutus, a Marine Corps veteran of the War in Afghanistan who sports khakis with real shrapnel holes, assigns the museum's volunteers to areas that match their expertise.

Brutus himself has volunteered in the museum's laser-firing range because of his background as a Marine Corps firearms instructor, in its four flight simulators because he's a student pilot, and in its VR room because he loves virtual reality.

No nonprofit could exist, nor would the museum be the experience that it is, without volunteers like them.

