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Jennifer O. D'Andrea-Terreri, founder of the not-for-profit Supporting, Empowering, Respecting Veterans and Their Families, or SERV, shows donations gathered at Christ Community Church, where she provides assistance that includes housing options. Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

Helping veterans overcome travails, Town of Lockport woman offers hope through SERV Niagara

COVER STORY: Town of Lockport woman who had a military upbringing offers hope to troubled former members of armed forces through SERV Niagara

BY: [Thomas Prohaska \(mailto:tprohaska@buffnews.com\)](mailto:tprohaska@buffnews.com)

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LOCKPORT – Jennifer O. D'Andrea-Terreri spent most of her childhood on the Marine Corps base at Camp Lejeune, N.C., so she knows all about the military mindset.

And her first husband died of a drug overdose 3½ years ago, so she knows the impact of addiction firsthand, too.

Now, D'Andrea-Terreri is putting all of her expertise together with a recently founded group that helps veterans in trouble, especially those lacking basic human necessities or those in trouble with the law or with substance abuse.

Last week, SERV Niagara, the not-for-profit group that D'Andrea-Terreri founded, reached an agreement to buy two houses on Walnut Street in Lockport, to be converted into housing for veterans.

“SERV Niagara’s main objective from its inception was providing housing options for homeless and disabled veterans,” she said. “We anticipated this long-term goal could take approximately three years. However, we were able to accomplish that goal within a year. I think people should know it’s a testament

to how hard we work and advocate for the needs of our veterans.”

D’Andrea-Terreri, a Town of Lockport resident, said the purchase of the houses was financed by an “investor” she declined to identify, who provided the money for the down payment on the purchases and will hold the mortgages.

One of the houses is to be used as “transitional housing” for six or seven male veterans at a time who are just getting out of drug rehabilitation. The other will have two apartments for the families of homeless veterans.

The transitional housing is the first of its kind in Niagara County, D’Andrea-Terreri said. They may open in six to eight weeks.

“The houses are not in bad condition at all. We got very lucky,” she said.

SERV stands for “Supporting, Empowering, Respecting Veterans and Their Families.” As unlikely as it may seem, it grew out of a Catholic elementary school reading assignment.

D’Andrea-Terreri’s four children attend St. Mary’s School in Swormville, where she and a friend organized an after-school reading club. One week a couple of years ago, the book was “December Stillness” by Mary Downing Hahn, a novel about a 15-year-old girl who tries to help a homeless Vietnam veteran.

D’Andrea-Terreri recalled that after the class finished reading the last few pages aloud – the book ends tragically for the veteran – “The first question out of their mouths was, ‘Why are veterans homeless?’”

D’Andrea-Terreri knew some of the answers.

“My dad was in the Navy, and my mom’s two husbands after that were in the Marines, so I’ve been around military guys my whole life,” she said.

SERV Niagara grew out of her experiences at Camp Lejeune and the tragic end of her relationship with her late first husband, Gary L. Valeri, who was not in the military but died from drug involvement.

SERV Niagara recently awarded its first scholarship in his memory. The Gary L. Valeri Scholarship is for veterans who want to study to become counselors and help other veterans.

“I’ve pretty much been around people my whole life who have used drugs and alcohol, very close family members,” D’Andrea-Terreri said. “This is something that obviously has affected me my entire life, so after losing my ex, my son and I had to deal with that, and it was the worst thing that ever happened in my life, I wanted to do something to help other people who have gone through what we’ve gone through.”

In January 2012, D’Andrea-Terreri, 38, founded the Kids Breaking Free Foundation, a not-for-profit that works with local social service and educational organizations to help children whose lives are stunted by drug addiction in their families. Many of the families she works with contain veterans.

The foundation has an after-school literacy program for middle schoolers at Christ Community Church, Pine and Genesee streets, where it also offers programs such as art therapy. D’Andrea-Terreri also works with adult education staff members from the Orleans/Niagara Board of Cooperative Educational Services, which rents half the church building.

D’Andrea-Terreri said the church has been generous in letting her store donations for veterans in the building, even though the entire stage there often is buried in boxes and bags.

Working with veterans in Niagara County, she soon found that they often couldn’t access services they needed because of a lack of transportation, since services weren’t offered within the county.

“Niagara County has the highest concentration of veterans in all of New York State,” she said, referring to census figures that show that about 19,000 county residents have served in the armed forces, out of an over-18 population of about 170,000.

About 10 percent of the county's population of veterans is believed to be homeless or disabled. The blame lies with physical and mental injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder, which often leads to substance abuse.

"When you can't get out of the area and you can't get the services, the problem just gets worse and worse and worse," D'Andrea-Terreri said.

While the St. Mary's children started a food drive that ended up collecting more than 6,000 food and personal hygiene items in three counties, the Kids Breaking Free Foundation was running a cooking instruction program for men, most of whom were coming out of jail or referred by social services agencies. One of the participants had been a homeless veteran and pointed out the need in that area.

"It just kind of blew up from there," D'Andrea-Terreri said. "If you are a veteran, if you know of a veteran who needs services, please call us. We'll bring them what they need."

That's what the all-volunteer group did practically nonstop between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Also, Mercedes-Benz of Buffalo donated the use of a Sprinter van to take veterans to counseling appointments.

She said her group has received tips not only from friends and relatives of veterans but from local government officials. Also, SERV Niagara has hauled much of its donated clothing to Freedom Village, a recently opened veterans adjunct to Horizon Village, the inpatient drug rehab facility in the county's Vantage International Pointe industrial park in Wheatfield. Freedom Village has a clothes closet for addicted veterans, she said.

"They'll come in there with the clothes on their back, and sometimes not fully clothed, either," D'Andrea-Terreri said.

She praised the county Veterans Service Agency but noted that it is set up to deal with the bureaucracy.

"We file for veterans' benefits against the Veterans Administration," said Alvin J. Thompson, county veterans service officer. "What she does has to do with veterans' homelessness issues."

"We provide basic human needs," D'Andrea-Terreri said. "We have support groups also, for family members. ... The VA, there's a lot of red tape there. There are veterans out there that I feel, and my board feels, should be getting more than they're getting, and we're out there to fill in those blanks."

Thompson agreed the need for that is great.

"Since I came to work in veterans (services) for the county in February 2011, it wasn't uncommon for me to receive two calls in a day about a veteran needing a homeless shelter," he said.

But before SERV Niagara, no one was specifically attending to those needs, Thompson added. He said the not-for-profit human services agencies, with the exception of Lockport CARES, the operators of a homeless shelter, don't track veterans' usage.

SERV also helps with résumés and finding jobs for veterans with "veteran-friendly businesses."

Because of her background living with people who are in trouble with drugs, D'Andrea-Terreri was chosen as a liaison to City of Lockport Drug Court and to Niagara County's Veterans Court. Both courts offer reduced criminal charges to defendants if they successfully complete a treatment program.

"I just felt I had something to offer," she said. Her main assignment in Veterans Court is trying to line up transportation to programs. D'Andrea-Terreri has a master list of transportation options, including some that accept VA benefits as payment.

Other fundraisers include the sale of coupon books for \$5 at the Lockport Bon-Ton store, starting Feb. 14, with 100 percent of the proceeds going to SERV Niagara.

SERV also gets food from an "extreme couponer," Anita Muzzi, who clips coupons and buys up sale-

priced food items and donates it. Also, SERV receives Girl Scout cookies for veterans from the East Amherst zone's cookie sales.

"Right from the beginning, our No. 1 goal was to provide housing for veterans, and we're just about there," she said. SERV is seeking some volunteers to help renovate the houses. The foundation can be reached by calling 553-6714 or by emailing jdandrea@SERVNIAGARA.org.

D'Andrea-Terreri said she considered joining the Marines herself but gave up the idea. "I'm not an exercising, working out kind of person. The (physical training), I don't think I could have hacked it," she said.

Instead, with her background as a military child and someone who's lived with the shadow of drug addiction in her family, D'Andrea-Terreri said, "This is pretty much my life's work. I have 38 years of personal attachment to it. It means something to me, and if I can help provide the resources and tools for someone to not have to go through the things I went through, that's what I want to do. I don't want to see anybody die. I don't want to see families suffer. I don't want kids to feel hopeless."

email: tprohaska@buffnews.com

Thomas Prohaska

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