



SERVICE NEVER ENDS FOR AMERICA'S HEROES



The United States of America would not be a free and undivided republic without the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice to serve their country. These service members continue to serve their community and fellow veterans through the several veterans' organizations that exist in Jackson County. You've seen them in uniform providing the color guard at parades, providing programs at school, supporting education through scholarships, and performing the final salute at a funeral. Members of these organizations keep Americanism alive and ensure no one forgets the cost of freedom.

Veterans' organizations are a supportive system for veterans, but their meeting places are also commonly used as the community gathering place. At one time or another, you've likely attended an event at a Legion/VFW hall or supported a fundraising event. If you have a chance to talk with a member of one of these organizations, you'll soon realize how community-centered these organizations truly are.

While we were not able to speak with every veterans' organization, we were able to learn more about several posts throughout Jackson County.

★★ VFW: Veterans of Foreign Wars ★★

Eligibility to join the VFW is based on two requirements: honorable service and service in a war, campaign, or expedition on foreign soil or in hostile waters. The nonprofit organization was initiated by veterans who returned home in 1899 to secure rights and benefits for their service. At the time, there was no support system or medical care when they returned.

Alma Center VFW Post 8494: Isaiah Hart joined the VFW about six years ago when he got out of the Army. He was attracted to join the organization because of the camaraderie and sense of community: "The VFW creates a home for the veterans to reintegrate into the community," shares Isaiah. "It gives veterans a sense of belonging, especially through organizing community events."

The Alma Center

Isaiah Hart stops for a photo with Carol Jarret at the Lincoln High School Veterans Day Program. Isaiah graduated with Carol's son Derrick, who is in the Air Force and was overseas at the time of the program.



VFW Post's main engagement event is the charcoal chicken feed that many community members look forward to during the Alma Center Strawberry Festival. After covering operating costs, the funds raised from events are invested back into the community. "We raise money for our post to operate and keep the lights on," Isaiah says. "It goes back into the community beyond that. We saved for a long time to build the new pavilion at our facility. Many community members rent our facility to use for events."

VFW members also take responsibility for flags and crosses at the cemetery, are present at memorial services, and perform outreach to veterans at the VA. "We support The Highground, help sponsor a veteran to attend the Freedom Honor Flight, provide scholarships, and are here to support any veteran in need at any time," shares Isaiah.

The Alma Center VFW currently has about 68 members and meets the second Tuesday of every month at the VFW building located at 111 E. Main Street, Alma Center.

Thompson-Redcloud Medal of Honor VFW Post 1959 (Black River Falls):

Travis Peardot joined VFW Post 1959 about six years ago. He is currently serving in his third year as post commander. Travis served in the Army National Guard and Air National Guard. He is still involved with the Wisconsin National Guard's 1158 Transportation Company. "Our main focus is veterans, but we serve others in the community," shares Travis. "It's about the comradeship of joining together with fellow veterans to do good for the community."



Travis Peardot

From time to time, you may see veterans or community members outside of businesses with poppies and a donation box. Your donation, large or small, directly impacts the local community. "This is the only fundraiser that we do," shares Travis. "One of the ways we use funds raised is to support local veterans with emergency/medical issues. We also support organizations like Project Christmas or fire safety education at the local schools."

Beyond monetary donations, veterans also volunteer their time to help other veterans with transportation, visiting veterans at the VA, attending funerals to provide honors and a final salute, Memorial Day ceremonies, and flag detail. "Our members volunteer with other organizations, such as the gun club," Travis shares.

Post 1959 meets once a month at 7:30 p.m. on the first Tuesday from October through April and the first Wednesday from May through September. The hall is rented from the

Miles-Hagen American Legion Post. “We are separate posts, but you may find us at the same events as the Legion,” Travis says.

★★ American Legion ★★

Anyone who served at least one day of active military duty since December 7, 1941, and was honorably discharged or is still serving active military duty honorably is eligible for membership with the American Legion. The four pillars of the American Legion are Americanism, children and youth, veterans’ affairs and rehabilitation, and national security. The nonprofit organization was chartered in 1919 to advocate for veterans, servicemembers, and their communities, bringing about social change.

Hanson-Lien American Legion Post 368 (Hixton/Taylor): Marie Dunnigan currently serves as commander of Post 368 and has been involved with the American Legion for 20 years. She served in the U.S. Army Reserves for 12 years and was activated in 1990 for Desert Storm where she was stationed as a military hygienist in Germany; Marie has practiced dental hygiene for 35 years. “The Hixton and Taylor American Legions merged in the 1940s,” shares Marie. “Between both communities we have 54 members.”

Post 368 attends the Veterans Day service at Blair-Taylor High School, conducts a Memorial Day service to honor the fallen, provides funeral honors, allows the local 4-H group to use the facility, and invests in educating area youth. The American Legion supports the county youth government day, sponsors a student for the state oratorical and Americanism and Government scholarship programs, and sends high school students to Badger Boys/Girls State to learn how the government operates. “These programs exist to develop a deeper knowledge and appreciation for the U.S. Constitution,” shares Marie.

The Post meets the third Thursday of each month at the hall located at 124 N. Hoffman St., Hixton. The hall is available for community rental.



Marie also coordinates the Jackson County Veterans Park Brick Markers. The park was developed by veterans and volunteers to honor all branches of service through bricks displayed at the base of the flag. The memorials and honors continue to grow, with new bricks set prior to Memorial Day and Veterans Day each year.



Neil S. Lewison American Legion Post 439 (Melrose): Dan Torres serves as adjutant of the American Legion Post 439 and has been involved for eight years. Dan served with the

Army and joined the American Legion because of its importance to the local community. “The Legion serves the community and those who have been in the military. It’s a place for veterans to go,” he shares.

The Melrose Legion hosts two of their own fundraisers each year, to include a steak fry and chicken Q. They also help with the Melrose Fourth of July celebration and annual fundraiser for the community pool.

“Our events help pay the utilities and keep our building open,” shares Dan. “Our facility is like the community center for Melrose. It’s used for receptions, memorials, graduation parties, and other events.”

Engaging new and younger members is a struggle amongst the veterans’ organizations as a whole. The Melrose American Legion provides outreach by sponsoring high school students to attend Badger Boys/Girls State and providing scholarships to high school graduates going into the military. “Even though it’s an organization for veterans, we’re more that that,” says Dan. “We serve the community.”

The Post’s member roster includes a little over 100 names. Members meet on the fourth Thursday of each month at the Legion Hall at 303 N. Washington St., Melrose.



Dan Torres



Ken Schoolcraft

Miles-Hagen American Legion Post 200 (Black River Falls):

Longtime American Legion member Ken Schoolcraft has been involved with the organization for 47 years. Ken served in the Air Force from 1964 to 1968 and was in Vietnam from October 1966 to 1967. Ken’s service and leadership didn’t end. He’s a past post commander, county commander, 7th district commander, and state vice commander. “Not just

Memorial Day or Veterans Day, but every day, we make sure no one forgets the cost of freedom,” he says.

Throughout the year, the Legion hosts their famous fish boil twice a year as well as a summer car show, facilitates memorial services and programs, promotes the state oratorical contest and Badger Boys/Girls State, sponsors the American Legion baseball program in conjunction with the Black River Falls High School, and supplies an honor squad and rifle salute for funeral military honors. “Our events support our operating budget,” Ken shares. “Beyond that, we make donations to other groups and support educational opportunities and scholarships to high school students.”

Post 200 has about 165 members. Members meet the first Thursday of the month from February to December at 7 p.m. Located at 421 Highway 54 West, Black River Falls, the hall



is used for several events, including receptions, reunions, graduations, luncheons, and other veterans' groups.

American Legion Post 162 (Alma Center): For the past 38 years, Tom Cummings has been involved with the American Legion and currently serves as commander. "I was in the Air Force for 21 years, mostly serving overseas," says Tom. "I joined in 1961 and retired in 1982."

Tom's service took him around the world from the Philippines, Okinawa, Korea, Turkey, to Italy and Germany. He was drawn to join the American Legion because

of the standards they represent and Americanism emphasis. "Each year we conduct a memorial service to remember and honor veterans and are invited to the school Veterans Day program at Lincoln Elementary," he shares.

Due to the small membership size, this post meets once a year in November at the VFW Hall in Alma Center. However, members are encouraged to attend the county American Legion meetings which are held every other month at different posts' facilities. "In the past we held events and visited the Tomah VA to have ice cream and cookies with the vets, live music, and card games," Tom concludes.



Tom Cummings (center) receives recognition from the Wisconsin State Commander (left) and National Commander (right) at the American Legion national meeting in Missouri for a Post with 100% renewal on membership.

★★ Marine Corps League ★★

The Mitchell Redcloud Jr. Detachment was chartered on September 27, 2010, and has 70 members representing Chippewa, Eau Claire, Jackson, La Crosse, and Monroe counties. "Mitchell was born in Hatfield and grew up in



Detachment members and Redcloud family members at the Highground Honor Stone Ceremony.

Black River Falls," shares Dennis Beattie, past detachment commander. "He is the only Native American to receive the Medal of Honor. Approval to use his name was given by his daughter, Anita Redcloud."

The Marine Corps League promotes the interests and preserves the traditions of the United States Marine Corps and fosters the ideals of Americanism and patriotic volunteerism in communities. Locally, Marine League members support inpatients at the Tomah VA and the Veterans Home in Chippewa Falls. "We also support the Highground Veterans Memorial Park and Camp Victory in Willard," says Dennis.

The organization also supports local projects, such as contributing financially to the Spring Creek School Museum restoration and performing a flag removal and raising ceremony at the museum's open house event. "We also held a rose drive (similar to the Legion poppies) to support scholarships offered annually to any veteran or member of his/her family," shares Dennis.

The Marine Corps league meets on the second Thursday of each month at 7 p.m. at the American Legion Post 200 building in Black River Falls. All Marines are welcome.

★★ Joining Forces ★★

While there are separate posts representing various communities, you'll find that these organizations often work together for the common goal of supporting fellow servicemembers and the local community. This was evident when talking with former Jackson County Veterans Service Officer Randy Bjerke. Randy is involved with the American Legion, VFW, Marine League, and 40&8 organizations.



Randy Bjerke

"Together, the organizations across Jackson County collect about 700 retired flags each year," says Randy. "We hold a flag retirement ceremony to properly dispose of flags."

Randy further explains how the area Legions and VFWs have worked together in the past to host the Jackson County Veterans' Picnic and visited the Tomah VA. They also join together as requested for attendance at parades, ceremonies, and funerals. If you've ever attended a funeral with military honors in this area, it is likely that Randy was there to play taps. "It's our final way to show them that their service mattered," he concludes.

If you have any interest in joining one of the local organizations, Randy recommends contacting current Jackson County Veterans Service Officer Hunter Rudnick at 715.284.0225. The Veterans Service Office is located in the Jackson County Court House at 307 Main Street, Black River Falls.—Brandi Shramek, Member Relations Advisor

LET'S MEET JACKSON ELECTRIC'S YOUTH AMBASSADORS

This school year, Jackson Electric's youth ambassador program welcomes 21 students from the Alma Center-Humbird-Merrillan, Black River Falls, Blair-Taylor, and Melrose-Mindoro school districts. Each month through May 2024 we'll introduce you to these leaders, who you may see out and about in the community.

Kaylee Youngthunder (second-year youth ambassador)



School attending: Black River Falls High School

Grade in school: Senior

Why did you join the youth ambassador program? "I joined the youth ambassador program because I enjoyed the learning and volunteer opportunities last year, and I want to continue making a difference through this program."

Future plans: Study nursing at UW-Madison.

Extracurricular activities: Cheerleading, figure skating, Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), pep club, science club, past Miss Black River Falls, National Honor Society president, and boys' hockey manager.

Hobbies/part-time work: Figure skating coach, receptionist at Studio 107, Black River Falls School District marketing intern.

What three items would you bring with you on a deserted island? Tent, Cheez-its, and a phone.

Luke Fischer (second-year youth ambassador)

School attending: Lincoln High School

Grade in school: Senior

Why did you join the youth ambassador program? "A friend from school brought me to a meeting and I enjoyed it. I also want to help the community."

Future plans: Study civil engineering and become a project manager.

Extracurricular activities: Basketball, baseball, football, and Future Farmers of America (FFA).

Hobbies/part-time work: Sports, video games, and hanging out with friends.



WELCOME, HEATHER



She was born in Alaska, raised in Tomah, Wis., and has lived in Tennessee, Texas, Arizona, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. Heather Spooner is happy to be back in the area and join Jackson Electric's team as our new finance manager. "My dad was in the Army, I was in the Air Force, and I married the Air Force, which led me to live in the south for 11 years," she says. "I've always liked this area of Wisconsin."

Heather brings with her a business administration degree with an emphasis in finance and accounting. She also holds a degree in math and science. Heather previously worked in a management position at Fort McCoy for 13 years before giving something new a try. "I was most recently in human resources," says Heather. "I missed my numbers."


Jackson Electric's finance manager position was the perfect opportunity for Heather to get back to what she does best. On a regular basis you'll find her managing accounts, overseeing the accounting department, and preparing and reporting financials to the board of directors, amongst other duties. "The not-for-profit aspect of the cooperative business model is new to me. I've always worked in the for-profit sector," she says. "I look forward to the educational opportunities."

Asked how her friends or family would describe her, Heather says, "I recently had someone tell me I had the biggest heart."

Heather shows love and care for others through her hobbies. "I enjoy making baked goods and have a hobby business of customized crafts, apparel, and gifts," she says. "I say hobby because I often give more than I sell."

When she's not baking or crafting, you may find Heather at the bowling alley or spending time with her three dogs: a Great Dane, Catahoula, and Dutch Shepherd.



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