

Good Samaritan Award recipient uses rods and reels to rebuild lives

Reel American Heroes founder sees 'fishing as therapy' to give back to our nation's veterans.

Like the healing heroes served by the organization he founded, Ron DeFreitas enjoys the tranquil promise of fishing, of casting a line to see what he might catch.

But this year's Good Samaritan Award winner has cast his line farther than most, creating a nonprofit organization that offers free outdoor recreational fishing opportunities for wounded and disabled veterans.

"One day on the water can do more for your outlook on life than a year in the hospital," DeFreitas observes.

The Good Samaritan Award is presented annually by the electric cooperatives of Virginia, Maryland and Delaware to someone whose good deeds have benefitted others in a way that may not have been widely recognized.

DeFreitas received the award in June at his home in Northern Virginia. It was presented by Larry Howdyshell, chairman of the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives (VMDAEC) board of directors, and Richard Johnstone, VMDAEC executive vice president.

DISABLED VET'S POSITIVE OUTLOOK INSPIRES IDEA

DeFreitas, a Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative (NOVEC) member, was inspired to form the Reel American Heroes Foundation (RAHF) six years ago, after volunteering at a local "Take a Vet Fishing" event. There, DeFreitas witnessed a disabled veteran's positive outlook on life despite the limitations of being a double amputee, and vowed to do more.

He started his quest by soliciting donations, "a dollar at a time," at local sporting goods and fishing retailers. DeFreitas also contacted Lew's, a Missouri-based fishing tackle company known for its American Hero Program.

"Lew's pledges a portion of all sales of its American Hero rod and other products to support organized programs



BILL SHERROD PHOTO

Richard Johnstone (left) and Larry Howdyshell (right) present the Good Samaritan Award to Ron DeFreitas at his Northern Virginia home.



PHOTO COURTESY RAHF

At the 4th Annual RAHF Tournament, volunteers (from left) Nelson Martinez, Dave Fletcher, George Byers, Ron DeFreitas and Jason DeFreitas present Silver Star recipient Christian Brown (seated, front) with an autographed B.A.S.S. Elite Series pro jersey as a thank-you for his service.

that help our nation's veterans return to enjoying outdoor recreational activities," he explains.

DeFreitas then contacted Virginia military bases and hospitals, offering to provide servicemen from all branches of

our nation's armed forces an opportunity to get out on the water for fun and competition.

Shortly after gaining 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in 2010, RAHF hosted its first bass tournament. This event benefited

2016
Good
Samaritan



Ron DeFreitas and his daughter, Ashley Gardner

BILL SHERROD PHOTOS

2015 RAHF Tournament at Hope Springs Marina



PHOTO COURTESY FREE AKINS PHOTOGRAPHY

two dozen combat veterans, with volunteer boaters from across Northern Virginia pitching in to help and take the vets out onto the water.

“We realized that dedicated sponsors would be needed to support all the activities we had in mind for RAHF,” DeFreitas says.

After the initial event, RAHF tournaments received a big boost from Jimmy Franklin, owner of Hope Springs Marina in Stafford, who provided use of his marina on a Saturday in July at no charge, while Stafford County’s Tourism Department helped cover lodging for out-of-state tournament participants.

“Every participant receives free gear they can take home and use to continue pursuing this sport, including tournament-quality rods, reels, tackle and fishing bait, a tackle box and even sunglasses,” explains Nelson Zapata, a disabled veteran who learned about RAHF in 2014.

In addition to its annual tournament each summer, “Team RAHF” offers fishing day trips to veterans in need all year long. Each vet is paired up with an experienced angler who can help teach the skills needed to fish for fun or even competitively.

DeFreitas is especially proud that RAHF has earned a “Top Rated Nonprofit” rating from Great Nonprofits.org for the past two years. “We’re a completely volunteer-run organization,” he explains. “A look at

‘I’ve always enjoyed fishing. But never did I realize how much, until after my injuries.

When I’m on the water, I don’t think about anything but the

fish. How will I get them to bite? What bait should I use?

Other times, I don’t think about anything more than the beauty of nature and peaceful silence of it all.’

— Joshua, Army veteran and Team RAHF participant

our most recent Form 990 will show that 93.5 cents out of every dollar we receive goes directly to serve our veterans.”

This statistic reflects DeFreitas’ success at soliciting donated awards and other resources, so that printing, postage, website hosting and rental of a storage facility are among the only expenses.

PERSONAL HEALTH CHALLENGES BRING FAMILY INTO EFFORT

In April 2015, DeFreitas was diagnosed with stage IV metastatic prostate cancer. Following surgery, he learned he also had Type II diabetes. These health concerns led him to consider cancelling RAHF’s upcoming tournament, when daughter Ashley stepped in to help.

Like her father, Ashley works for the Prince William County school system (DeFreitas is a network engineer and his daughter is a school nurse.) Four years earlier, she’d come up with RAHF’s legal name by changing one letter from “Real” to “Reel,” and she now borrowed an idea from her career in healthcare to create #stRONG T-shirts that family members and RAHF supporters began wearing that summer.

RAHF’s July 25, 2015, tournament at Hope Springs Marina was a tremendous success, involving 82 active-duty and retired military people, more than 100 volunteers, and boaters from around the United States. Four B.A.S.S. Elite series

professionals, including John Crews of Roanoke, gave participants a chance to learn from the best in the sport, with tournament rules requiring a majority of the scored fish to be caught not by the pro, but by the veteran.

As DeFreitas continues his fight against cancer, his daughter, a member of Rappahannock Electric Cooperative, has taken over as RAHF executive director. With help from her husband Chris Gardner, brother Jason, mother Maria and other friends and family, she handles the organization's day-to-day needs, allowing DeFreitas to focus on seeking out new sponsors and planning RAHF's planned expansion into saltwater fishing events.

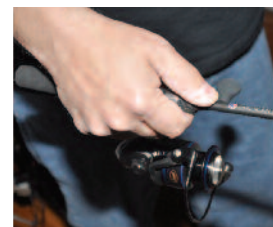
"We're delighted that Reel American Heroes events have been featured on nationally televised fishing shows, including *Timmy Horton Outdoors* and *Kim Stricker's Hook n' Look*, and we're excited to have just secured a (sponsorship) commitment from Rosner Toyota of Stafford, Virginia," says DeFreitas.

"Ron is the personification of a Good Samaritan, one who unselfishly helps others, especially strangers," says Richard Johnstone of VMDAEC, which presented DeFreitas with this award.

But those RAHF has helped don't stay strangers for long. DeFreitas and other RAHF volunteers have made lifelong friends in the veterans they serve, glimpsed through testimonials such as this:

"My son, a combat-injured Marine, unexpectedly got to come home for Christmas. I contacted RAHF to find out if they had anything available for my son and his dad to do together, and immediately received a call that a fishing trip would be scheduled within the week. Chad Cox took them out on his boat and gave them RAHF gear. They had a great day fishing on the lake. After the year we've had dealing with our son's PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), brain injury and hospital stays, I can't express what this fishing trip meant to our entire family." ■

PHOTO COURTESY FREE AKINS PHOTOGRAPHY



BILL SHERROD PHOTO

Left: Wounded veteran Patrick Hanley with professional bass fisherman, John Crews. Top: The specialized fishing reel for one-armed angling use, being developed by Ron DeFreitas.

RAHF Seeks Funding to Patent a One-Armed Fishing System

One of the first veterans RAHF served was Pat Hanley. "Pat's father Edward reached out to us," Ron DeFreitas recalls. Hanley, who had lost his left arm while serving his country, was near despair at the time. His intense desire to be able to fish without assistance inspired DeFreitas to begin designing a one-armed fishing system, with help from a friend who had a home machine shop.

"Others had tried to create a motorized reel that could be operated with just one finger, but these were heavy and didn't hold up to regular use," DeFreitas said. With Pat testing the early designs, DeFreitas' friend figured out how to securely attach a battery-powered electric motor to the rod so it was sturdy enough to survive multiple casts, with a battery pack linked by a cord so it could fit in one's pocket. "Our current design, which we're seeking to patent, only adds three ounces to the weight of the reel," he explains.

DeFreitas estimates that it will cost \$12,000 for a specialized patent attorney to conduct the needed searches and legal process to apply for a patent.

"Once we have that in hand," DeFreitas says, "my goal would be to get on the TV show *Shark Tank* and pitch our program to Mark Cuban, a well-known supporter of programs for veterans." DeFreitas says that instead of earning money from this invention, he'd seek a partnership that would ensure the Reel American Heroes Fishing System would be made available to our nation's wounded and disabled veterans at no cost. "They sacrificed everything for our country, and deserve all we can do in return," DeFreitas concludes.

As for Pat? With support from RAHF and his family, he's now enrolled in Georgetown Law School and has only missed one tournament since getting involved with RAHF, when it happened to coincide with an entrance exam.

RAHF supporters can donate online at www.reelamericanheroes.org or mail a check payable to "RAHF" to the Reel American Heroes Foundation, 4196 Merchant Plaza #133, Woodbridge, VA 22192.

You Can Nominate a Good Samaritan or Unsung Virginian

Recipients of the Good Samaritan Award and the Unsung Virginian Award are chosen by an awards committee of the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives (VMDAEC). This committee is made up of members of the boards of directors of VMDAEC's 15 member cooperatives.

The VMDAEC Awards Committee this year is inviting readers of *Cooperative Living* magazine to nominate candidates to be considered for the two prestigious statewide awards.

The Unsung Virginian Award recognizes a Virginian who has done great philanthropic work with no public

praise or recognition. The Good Samaritan Award recognizes a person whose good deeds may or may not have been publicly recognized. The Good Samaritan Award recipient may or may not be a Virginian.

If you're interested in nominating someone for the Unsung Virginian or Good Samaritan awards, please fill out the nomination form on page 36 of this issue, and mail it to Vikki Heath at 4201 Dominion Blvd., Suite 101, Glen Allen, VA 23060, Attn. Awards Program.

Or go online to www.vmdaec.com/content/awards and fill out the nomination form online. ■