

'It's Something We Have to Do'

Three veterans from New York kayaked the Hudson River last year to raise awareness of veteran suicides and homelessness

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The journey began with an inflated unicorn floating down Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondack Mountains of New York at an elevation of more than 4,000 feet.

Kevin Keaveny, 51, Mathew Russell, 36, and Garrison Benz, 28, had trekked up Mt. Marcy on the southwest slope of the Adirondack Mountains, where the lake nestled between green pastures under a sky laced with gray clouds.

In reaching the highest point in the state of New York, the three veterans set the pink unicorn on the stream, hoping to send a subtle message to all veterans.

“The idea behind it was to smile, that life doesn’t have to be so serious,” said Keaveny, an Afghanistan War veteran and current junior vice commander of VFW Post 2837 in Shandaken, New York. “You’ve got three idiots running down the river in wooden kayaks they’ve made themselves. There’s no reason you can’t get out there into the world to escape being sad, mad or hopeless.”

Keaveny, Russell and Benz spent the next 25 days paddling south on selfmade kayaks headed for New York City along the 315-mile Hudson River.

‘OUR MESSAGE REMAINED CLEAR’

They slept on docks, in parks and other public places near the river, paddling about 22 miles a day from Sept. 5 to Sept. 30 in hopes of spreading their message, as well as raising awareness about veteran suicides and homelessness. An average of 20 veterans take their own lives each day, according to VA.

“As veterans, we have all been exposed to some crazy stuff, laughed at things many would not understand and bonded over good times and bad,” Keaveny said. “So our message

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remained clear: You are never alone. We are here for you. Be you, own your life and live it, love it, kick its ass.”

The message was heard throughout the towns and cities that port along the Hudson, where the trio often stopped to meet fellow veterans, issue statements for local news outlets and rest their weary arms and eyes.

In each town along the river, the veterans also advocated for the Hudson Valley Center for Veteran Reintegration, a nonprofit that opened its doors on Aug. 5, 2020, in Ulster, New York, about 104 miles north of New York City.

Professing the impact it’s had on them, the trio raised \$8,821 for the Center’s extensive list of programs during their trip down the Hudson River. From financial literacy classes to therapeutic woodworking and kayak building, the purpose of the Center has been to help veterans adjust to life after the military.

“Personally, it’s been the happiest I’ve ever been,” said Keaveny, the Center’s founder and executive director of operations. “Working with these folks is a blessing, and seeing how it helps them is the most rewarding.”

‘NO MATTER WHAT THEY DID, IT’S OKAY’

Keaveny, Russell and Benz built their wood kayaks for the trip at the Center, as well as other things like birdhouses, lanterns and cutting boards. But the most important thing the Center offers is hope, something that Ulster County executive and Iraq War veteran Pat Ryan noticed in talks with members.

Ryan’s administration has since worked closely with Keaveny and the Center to incorporate the Vet2Vet program, which allows the county to refer veterans to the Center. In doing so, the county offers guidance and publicly promotes the Center to help it get budget-sustaining donations.

Through the Vet2Vet program, members of the Hudson Valley Center for Veteran Reintegration can share their stories with peers who understand them, as well as learn how to reintegrate into civilian life when their duty ends.

“Every soldier, every veteran, every serviceman has their own story,” Keaveny said. “We treat them all with respect and never ask for their stories unless they’re offered. My message to them is that no matter what they did, it’s okay. No matter what happened, it’s okay.”

It’s with such a message, shared with the masses that gathered to greet them along the Hudson, that the three men continued their journey.

WEATHERING EMOTIONS

Making their way from the Adirondacks in upstate New York to the Hudson Valley and eventually into the New York Bay, the trio was not without challenges along the Hudson.

From weather to strong currents, the three veterans paddled on, relying on support from a 32-foot sailboat manned by Vietnam veteran and Post 2837 Commander Randy Montagno and his first mate, Navy veteran Lyndon Bresett.

“Weather, winds and figuring out how to handle the kayak through rough waters was very demanding, but we got along great,” Keaveny said. “That’s what happens when you put veterans back in a situation where it becomes a mission.”

Russell, an Iraq War veteran and the current commander of VFW Post 5034 in Saugerties, New York, added that the wind had been against them most of the trip, but it was important to stay true to the cause.

The trio eventually arrived at the Manhattan mouth of the Hudson on Sept. 30, where they docked before officially ending the trip at the 9/11 Memorial in New York City.

The trip to Ground Zero prompted painful memories for Keaveny, who served from 1991 to 2011 as part of Army National Guard units in New York and Vermont.

For the Afghanistan War veteran, it evoked memories of his time with the 42nd Inf. Div., one of the first National Guard units to arrive after the World Trade Center fell during the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

“It was the first time since the attacks that I had been back there,” Keaveny said. “After a few weeks on the Hudson and being physically drained, I remember just breaking down and crying. It was very emotional for me.”

PLANNING A TRIP FOR THIS SUMMER

Keaveny, Russell and Benz expect to complete half the Hudson River trip on kayaks again this summer, adding that it’s something they intend to continue to do in order to remind veterans that they’re not alone.

The trip would be another attempt to raise awareness for veteran suicides and homelessness, as well as promote the Hudson Valley Center for Veteran Reintegration’s programs for helping veterans cope with the struggles of transitioning back into civilian life.

“It’s something we know we have to do,” Keaveny said. “The truth is that it’s not about us. We want to be put out of business, if you can believe that. Our goal is to keep our brothers

and sisters
from struggling and getting them back on their feet.”

This article is featured in the June/July 2021 issue of [VFW magazine](#). It was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.