

'It's Rejuvenating'

An Iraq War veteran and VFW member has devoted more than 17 years to mentoring youth in his Ohio community, receiving national recognition for his achievements

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Keagan Miller's selfless devotion to others began more than two decades ago at the Marine Corps Reserve Center at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio.

As a Marine Corps reservist with MP Co. C, 4th Law Enforcement Bn., in 2000, Miller met Vietnam veteran John Bankowitz, who served as unit commander of the Dayton Young Marines, a national youth program for boys and girls between 8 and 18 years old.

"He talked me into coming in and helping out, so I did," said Miller, who deployed in 2004 with the 1st Marine Division near Fallujah, Iraq. "Then you see yourself helping one or two kids get their life together, and it kind of gets you hooked."

Born in Kentucky, raised in Florida and living most of his life in Ohio, Miller's volunteerism with the Young Marines has led to more than 17 years of serving the youth, earning recognition along the way for his innovative and relentless mentorship skills.

Today, Miller is unit commander of the Miami Valley Young Marines in Ohio, as well as a training officer for the program's entire Midwest Division.

Aside from his full-time job at OnSolve, a national critical communications platform with offices in Dayton, Miller devotes between 1,200 and 1,500 hours a year to the youth program.

"It's rejuvenating, actually," said Miller, a member of VFW Post 5436 in Troy, Ohio. "Some kids turn out to be rock stars from the beginning, but those who are going down the wrong path, and you're able to help them change course and be great, well, that's the transformation that keeps us coming back."

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Over the years, Miller's acumen for mentoring his area's youth has earned him and his unit many national awards. Within the Young Marines' national program, split into six regional divisions, Miller's unit within Division 5 has won the Drug Enforcement Administration's Enrique Camarena Red Ribbon Award five times (four consecutive) in his tenure as commander.

Named in honor of Camarena, a DEA agent kidnapped and murdered in 1985 by a Mexican drug cartel, the national award also recognizes a single mentor of the program each year. Miller received

the 2021 national award for his significant contributions to drug prevention. Those included enhancing the drug prevention platform by completing nearly 500 drug demand reduction education hours on behalf of the Young Marines.

"Our motto is to help kids live a healthier and drug-free lifestyle," Miller said. "We teach them everything from how to deal with mental health, drugs, bullies and eating right, to being an overall good citizen. I'm more concerned about the kids, but drug prevention would be right up there with important duties."

In 2017, Miller's Miami Valley Young Marines also won the Department of Defense's national Fulcrum Shield award, given to a military-affiliated youth organization that spreads anti-drug messages in local communities.

Miller's unit received the award during a ceremony on Oct. 11, 2017, in the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon in Arlington, Va. They were honored for contributing 2,000 hours of total community service. That included more than 800 hours of training and teaching drug demand reduction to others in the community.

"When I received the news about the Fulcrum Shield, I was ecstatic," Miller said. "I knew about the hard work that my Young Marines and staff put into making drug demand reduction for our community that year, and it's amazing to be recognized for our efforts."

Miller's leadership also extends beyond youth programs. Along with Bankowitz, Miller serves as a commissioner on the Miami County Veterans Service Commission. The Iraq War veteran's voice lends itself to advocating on behalf of a large veterans' community in his hometown.

A married father of three with a need to serve his fellow veterans and the younger generation, Miller plans on continuing to mentor and advocate for years to come.

"Doing this, the Young Marines and veterans' groups, is how you continue to serve a greater purpose," Miller said. "That is something I learned from John Bankowitz and other mentors from that program over the years."

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