

MCVET

By Jacqueline Burrell

Two words that should never be uttered together: veterans and homeless.

Slightly more than a quarter century ago, 4 veterans, deeply involved with several Veterans Service Organizations, couldn't believe what they were seeing. Veterans. Homeless. On the streets of Baltimore.

Determined to do something about it, they developed a program, using the military as a model, to offer not only shelter, but hope and a promise of a new tomorrow.

Breaching the corridors of City Hall, they presented their plan to then Baltimore City Mayor Kurt Schmoke. Not only did Mayor Schmoke understand the need, he could envision the concept of holistically helping veterans by empowering them, creating an atmosphere of teamwork, camaraderie, and rewards for hard work. Success would be having these veterans re-enter society as whole, healthy, and productive citizens, with thanks from a grateful city and nation.

Mayor Schmoke sold the old Sweetheart Cup factory - a 110,000 square foot building in downtown Baltimore - to the new non-profit organization, the Maryland Center for Veterans Education & Training, Inc. (MCVET), for a single dollar.

Back in the early 1900s, four Russian immigrant brothers expanded their baking company making Baltimore headquarters for the cup and straw part of their business. Innovative, by 1981, the Shapiro brothers' Sweetheart Cup Company made every cold drink cup sold at McDonald's in the U.S., as well as the fast food chain's hamburger containers. Sweetheart also supplied half the ice cream cones eaten across the country.

They made a lot of money. They also treated their employees like family: Christmas trees during the holidays, popsicles in the summer, birthday gifts, and scholarships for children. Joseph Shapiro, known as "Uncle Joe" reportedly would just as easily ladle crab soup for any of his employees who stopped by his home as designing the next cup. The environment was built on kindness and consideration. Generations worked at Sweetheart because they were valued. All of its benevolent activities, including sizeable charity donations, were built into the budget.

Sweetheart was definitely a for-profit firm. Under the Shapiro brothers, the company treated employee and customer alike, with dignity and respect. MCVET, a 501C3 nonprofit, believes and practices the same. Its motto: It takes an entire community to help a veteran heal! The spirit of good works lives on in the sprawling, old brick building.

That was back in 1993. Today, nicknamed MCVET, the organization has evolved into what some consider mirrors “boot camp,” an experience shared by veterans when they were new recruits in the military.

“It’s a model that works,” notes Jeffrey Kendrick, a retired Air Force veteran, who is MCVET’s Executive Director. “It’s a simple concept, really. The veterans come to us with just the clothes on their backs. We house them, feed them, get them any counseling they need, train them, and then help them get a job and housing.”

The average stay at MCVET is 15 months for veterans who range in age between 24 and 71 years of age, Kendrick says. Both male and female veterans from all branches of the military are served.

The mission: provide homeless veterans and other veterans with the Home, the Hope, and the Help they need.

“We are in the business of saving lives,” says Cereta Spencer, Director of Development and Community Engagement.

On three floors live platoons of 40 veterans, each divided into squads of 10. Every veteran who enters MCVET undergoes evaluation and is assigned a case manager. They are also given duties to perform.

Like boot camp, they sleep barracks style, in upper and lower bunks and are up by 5:30 every morning. Breakfast in the cafeteria is over by 6:30am. Communal showers are on each floor as are recreational spaces including computer rooms to send emails to family and friends. Each level competes to have the shiniest floors and neatest quarters.

It’s not an easy program, but reminds veterans of the bond and experiences they had while in the service. It also gives them the opportunity to trust again.

In addition, there are trips to ball games, crab feasts, and myriad other activities.

Holliday Tolson, who came to MCVET, said recently on a TV talk show that MCVET was a “good fit for me. I struggled through my addiction. I was so concerned how to live a sober life. I listened to people who knew how to be sober and I let them teach me.” A MCVET graduate, Tolson remains “connected.”

The MCVET community includes vans, trucks, a fully equipped barber shop, beauty salon, gym, and used clothes area, all donated. In fact, pretty much everything at MCVET is through generous donations, dropped off onto the building’s massive loading dock.

Like most non-profits, MCVET relies on grants, corporate giving campaigns and outright handouts. “We need financial help, always,” says Kendrick.

“There are so many reasons veterans find themselves homeless,” he says. “Alcohol, drugs, and post traumatic stress are just a couple. Many have family in good homes, but don’t feel they can live there.”

Counseling is provided for mental health, substance abuse and other issues affecting veterans.

MCVET welcomes veterans 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. However, they must be detoxified at the Veterans Affairs Hospital or other medical facility before they can be admitted.

Veterans can live in MCVET’s 120 bed transitional housing for up to two years with access to all of its educational, training, counseling and employment services. This Transitional Housing is one of four (4) MCVET housing programs.

From 9am to 4pm, it offers a Day Drop-In Program, which provides shelter, clothing, toiletries, crisis intervention and case management to homeless veterans who choose not to enter into its regular program. During emergencies, the Day Drop-In also serves as a Code Blue Shelter.

Its Emergency Shelter Program safely houses up to 50 homeless vets, while they prepare to move into the Transitional Housing Program. Veterans are assessed by VA psychologists and other health care professionals.

MCVET also operates a Single Room Occupancy (SRO) program - permanent housing subsidized by Section 8, a housing voucher program for low-income residents. SRO is an essential component as it allows veterans the ability to move into permanent housing while maintaining contact with available MCVET resources.

Some vets, living in other MCVET SRO units, but working elsewhere, are required to pay a small portion of their income for rent and utilities. They also use communal kitchens and are given individual storage space for non perishable items.

“It prepares them for the next step – moving into their own home,” explains Spencer. “For some, making the transition is hard. They’re ok working out there, making good money, but feel comfortable and supported living here.”

“Our reward is seeing the men and women who’ve served come through our doors and to see them walk out again,” says Kendrick, knowing that what happened in between helped to make their exit possible.

MCVET also reaches out to its Baltimore City neighbors, helping with outpatient counseling and support on a separate basis. It aids veterans and others who are mandated to take classes for DWIs with court ordered classes. For youth in the area, Kendrick is exploring adding a flight simulator program to interest them in math and becoming pilots.

Based upon their recent three year loss of funding from The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); MCVET struggles financially but through the support of those who

champion their cause, volunteers, corporate sponsorships, MCVET Alumni, and Veteran Service Organizations; continues to provide first class service.

“We remain united as a staff, and Board of Directors, and have pledged that until there is no longer any homeless veterans in American, our doors must remain open,” says Kendrick.

In total, MCVET provides transitional housing, contracted mental health services, employment, education, substance abuse support, financial stability, case management, benefits counseling, support groups, after care programs and Intensive Outpatient and Outpatient Drug and Alcohol Treatment. In other words, everything veterans living on the streets, homeless, need to re-enter society.

To help MCVET, please visit www.mcvet.org