

Veteran shares experiences as lead of Soldiers Helping Soldiers, helping homeless

By **BROCK WEIR**

Maj. Neil Gagnon can't help sneaking a peek whenever he pulls up to an intersection and sees another car with an Ontario license plate emblazoned with "Veteran."

As a veteran of Afghanistan himself, he knows the realities of conflict, but everyone has their own stories to tell.

When he looks over at the driver, he sometimes sees someone his own age. Sometimes they skew younger, sometimes Gagnon's own fifty-something years are behind them.

They might look different on the surface, but they are united by one thing that bridges any generational divide: service.

"I am always curious where they served, what they did, and you never know to what extent," says Gagnon. "They could have joined the military and done very little, or they could have done everything. They could have gone on massive amounts of overseas deployments and seen horrific things. When it comes down to it, it doesn't matter what they have done - we're different ages, have seen different wars and conflicts, had different occupations - but, at the end of the day, everyone has done one thing: they put the uniform on because we care about Canada and that is really what is all about."

This is the message Maj. Gagnon, who currently serves as Culture Evolution Coordinator for the Canadian Armed Forces, delivered to the Citizen ahead of Remembrance Day.

In this role, which Maj. Gagnon refers to as a "huge undertaking", he helps oversee significant change to the culture within the Canadian forces. It is a mission he is dedicated to, but it is just one way in which he continues to serve. Outside of the formal ranks, he's also the new lead for Soldiers Helping Soldiers, an organization that works with homeless Veterans to connect them with the services they need.

"We aid in the recognition and identification of Veterans amongst Canada's homeless; accelerate the reconnection of those Veterans with their former profession and with; and connect Veterans to Veterans Affairs Canada or to program deliverers and service providers - reducing the risk of homelessness, mitigating its effects, and accelerating recovery from and life beyond homelessness," says the organization in its mission statement.

"We are a source for trusted relationships with individual Vets, partners assisting them to reach service providers and animate the benefits they deliver. We contribute and support the ecosystem that confronts homelessness at the community level. Each Soldiers Helping Soldiers chapter lives and operates at the community level. A nationally-enabled all-volunteer effort, community level chapters plan, coordinate and conduct a range of activities that support [our] mission objectives, including in ways that complement the full work of other organizations. Working in shelters, community patrolling, peer support, and part-time drop-in centre support are examples of those activities."

"Sometimes it's choices, sometimes it's mental health, and drug addiction can be involved in that," expands Maj. Gagnon on some of the factors that sadly allow some veterans to fall through the cracks. "There could be relationship breakups, all kinds of things. But it is just the same as normal homelessness. I don't think it is unique to the military. The military tends to take care of their own. It is not just an employer where you come to work and you go home and collect a paycheque. They feed them, they clothe them, there is medical help - when someone gets posted everything is kind of done for you [in your career] that when they leave, some of them might feel loss, the sense of belonging isn't there and they just fall on tough times."

In Maj. Gagnon's day-to-day in this role, he and his team don uniforms - often combat pants and boots and a t-shirt - and visit homeless shelters and soup kitchens to recognize and identify anyone who is former military.

?It doesn't have to be an Afghanistan veteran or someone who has done what they think is an amazing job, it can be anyone who has joined the military and spent a week or two, spent a month, spent a year or two in Reserves or full-time military, serving their country and, for whatever reason, something has happened to them and they have fallen on tough times, whether it is mental health, drug addiction, or a little bit of both,? he explains. ?We reconnect those people and we bring them to resources in the community.?

It is also often a question of just who is a Veteran. While the definition of ?Veteran? might be broad, embracing the label of veteran is sometimes a more difficult task for the individual.

?I have talked to colleagues of mine who have been awarded the Sacrifice Medal for having sustained injury in Afghanistan and how they don't even want that medal. They don't want to be recognized in that way. What is a veteran?? says Gagnon. ?What it is all about is it is an ordinary person, just a regular Canadian who has decided to put on a uniform and serve their country. People have done that going to a war and some people have done basic training, or something happened and they got out, but they are still veterans. There's humility and humbleness with being a soldier. Some of us want to serve our country, we want to do a cool job doing cool things, serving our country, doing what's right and at the end of the day we want to come back and just be anonymous. We don't do it to be famous, we don't do it for the speeches, or for the fanfare.?

In his work with Soldiers Helping Soldiers, helping just one individual is a success.