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'Law office on wheels' hits road to help veterans



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Detroit university program visits S.D.

By Steve Liewer
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

October 9, 2008

SAN DIEGO – In another world, former Marines Mark Reccek and Preston McKaughan might have kicked back at a Legion post somewhere to swap stories about their days as Devil Dogs.

Instead, they met yesterday over a table at the St. Vincent de Paul shelter in downtown San Diego. McKaughan, 23, is an Iraq War vet with post-traumatic stress disorder who is on the verge of homelessness. The Marine Corps booted him out for medical reasons last year with an other-than-honorable discharge – unjustly, he believes – leaving him without access to VA medical or military college benefits.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune
Joon H. Sung, (right) participating in the University of Detroit Mercy's Project SALUTE, listened yesterday to veteran Frank Gonzalez.

Reccek, 32, left Camp Pendleton eight years ago as a supply corporal and is now in his last year as a law student at the University of Detroit Mercy. He's found his calling helping down-and-out vets who have struggled against the formidable bureaucracies of the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs.

Reccek is one of several Detroit Mercy law professors and students in San Diego this week to aid low-income vets as part of an 18-month-old program called Project SALUTE.

"As a former Marine, I feel like I have the duty to be there for these people, to represent them," said Reccek, 32, who grew up in Bethlehem, Pa. "These are individuals who served their country. They deserve a lot better than they've

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been getting.”

The VA has struggled to keep up with an avalanche of cases as aging Vietnam War-era veterans are suffering from health problems just as Iraq and Afghanistan war vets are leaving the military more aware than ever of what they are due.

Online: Go to the Project SALUTE Web site at projectsalute.org, or call (888)-836-5294. A clinic will be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. today at VFW Post 3787, 4370 Twain Ave., Mission Valley.

“These are old benefits, but they're new to us,” said Frank Troutman, 61, who served in the Army from 1965 to 1972. “If I'd been up on it, I could have been getting benefits for 20 years.”

Detroit Mercy, a Roman Catholic university with a history of social outreach, started the program last year at the urging of four faculty members who had been trained by the National Organization of Veterans Advocates, said Michael Bryce, the law school's director of clinical programs.

Project SALUTE began with a series of clinics in Michigan that gave law professors and students – few of whom had served in the military – practical experience with the day-to-day problems of veterans.

“The great thing about this clinic is it's exposing everyone to real-life issues,” Reccek said. “Each case is like a novel.”

Word of the program spread around the country. General Motors donated an RV that professors describe as a “law office on wheels,” and the Detroit Mercy group hit the road this year. So far, they have visited 11 states in the East Coast and Midwest. San Diego is the only West Coast stop so far.

Because none of the professors or students is certified to practice law in California, Bryce said their job is mainly to steer clients toward aid agencies or veterans' services organizations. Sometimes they are the first people to sit down and really listen to a vet's problem.

In every city, the Detroit Mercy professors also give a daylong class to local attorneys in how to help vets. The classes are free, as long as each lawyer agrees to handle at least one case pro bono. So far, Bryce said, 37 have signed up for this week's session.

More than 60 veterans sought help yesterday at St. Vincent de Paul. Today's clinic is from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at VFW Post 3787, 4370 Twain Ave., in Mission Valley.

McKaughan said he feels hopeful about his case for the first time. A former aviation operations specialist at Miramar Marine Corps Air Station, he described himself as a “Marine's Marine” until he returned from Iraq.

McKaughan suffered a violent reaction to medication after a misdiagnosed illness and went absent without leave. He returned to duty and, although two psychiatrists – one civilian, one military – attributed his absence to the medicine, McKaughan said he was declared medically unfit and handed an

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other-than-honorable discharge.

Reccek told him he thought McKaughan had a good case and would help to find a lawyer to handle it for free.

"I was lost," McKaughan said. "I can't thank him enough."

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By Cynical on 10/09/2008 at 6:01 a.m.

Something should be done for veterans. At one time in the State of California, approximately 60% of the prison inmate population were veterans. There should be another way to rehabilitate these American patriots. Incarcerating some of the corrupt California Legislatures would be a good start.

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By catrant on 10/09/2008 at 8:30 a.m.

"By Cynical on 10/09/2008 at 6:01 a.m.

Something should be done for veterans. At one time in the State of California, approximately 60% of the prison inmate population were veterans."

Where did you find this statistic?

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By Perch2 on 10/09/2008 at 9:00 a.m.

Something truly good in a time of a lot of bad, not to mention the overflow of greed in our country; GOOD going! This warms my heart

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By Cynical on 10/09/2008 at 11:43 a.m.

"Where did you find this statistic?"

State of California Bureau of Prison Records and also there was an article in the UT Parade magazine about that.

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By catrant on 10/09/2008 at 2:35 p.m.

"By Cynical on 10/09/2008 at 11:43 a.m.

"Where did you find this statistic?"

State of California Bureau of Prison Records and also there was an article in the UT Parade magazine about that."

Thanks!

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