

Walk the Walk: Kathy Granfield is CT VFW 2019 Teacher of the Year

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BRANFORD —

Since the first day Kathy Granfield began captaining a 34-foot vessel and offering free charter fishing trips to veterans, she only wanted one thing: to give active duty, retired, wounded and recovering veterans the solace and healing she knows comes with being out on the water.

That all changed this summer, when one of the guests aboard the boat Kathy captains for the non-profit she founded, Veteran Angler (VA) Charters, happened to be an official with Connecticut Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). When he learned that this remarkable woman was also a North Branford Intermediate School (NBIS) science teacher, he started the ball rolling to put Kathy in the running to be selected as Connecticut VFW's 2019 Teacher of the Year. With fervent support from her teaching peers and administrators, the nomination went in.

In November, Kathy was surprised to learn she had been selected as District Two VFW Teacher of the Year. Then, in January, Kathy found out she had been named the statewide winner. And, while Kathy's not even trying to imagine that she could be selected national VFW 2019 Teacher of the Year come spring, this very modest and motivated educator is now indeed in the running for the national title.

As Kathy notes, teachers who have earned this award are usually those who teach the important story of America's veterans in history or social studies classes.

While she may be teaching science at NBIS, Kathy has also been modeling how one person can make a difference through their actions. It's not only a principle she lives by, it's now something every 8th-

grade NBIS student will experience. This year, at Kathy's urging and with support from faculty and administration, NBIS initiated the first-ever student PRIDE community service program for 8th graders.

Instead of learning from teachers about the value of getting involved, the students spent the first half of this school year learning about local charities and organizations. In the second half of this school year, the students will fan out to provide their selected group with a required five hours of hands-on community service.

"For a lot of our students in 6th and 7th grade, our [PRIDE] program teaches them about all the qualities it takes to be a good citizen," says Kathy, "I think, by the time they get to 8th grade, there's nothing like doing it, [otherwise] it's a missed opportunity. They can act, and there's so much you can do."

While she truly does not want to bring attention to herself for what is being accomplished through VA Charters, Kathy has also recently recognized that she could be using her effort as an example to help students become more involved.

"You have to walk the walk," says Kathy. "And if people don't see you walking the walk, you're not really being the example you think you are. And as uncomfortable as a I am talking about what I do, it made me wonder if I've been a little too quiet. I think maybe I have not done as good a job as I should have in really explaining what I do, and how hard it is, but how rewarding it is."

Casting Off

Kathy began her professional career as a chemist working in research at the Yale School of Medicine and the Regional Water Authority, and found her way into teaching about 27 years ago. She taught science in New Haven for nine years before launching into what is now her 18th year of teaching science to North Branford 8th graders.

Kathy grew up on the water in West Haven, where her dad and grandfather were commercial and recreational fishermen. She remembers talking to her late dad, a Korean War veteran, about something she'd learned in 2006 that had deeply affected her.

“It was the first year that more service men and service women survived combat and then came home and took their own lives,” she says.

Kathy thought back to what the NBIS community had in the years leading up to that time to support our troops.

“From 2003 on, the schools did all kinds of things for the soldiers; we sent letters, we sent care packages, we did the whole thing. And we had been doing that for three or four years, and then that [statistic] happened,” says Kathy. “And I remember going home, and sitting on the back deck with my dad and saying, ‘I don’t get it. How could they work so hard to survive combat and then come home, and it’s worse here? How does that happen?’”

As her dad said, “if you haven’t been through it, it’s going to be hard to understand,” Kathy recalls, adding he also told her, “but if you want to do something about it, you should do something about it.”

She says she thought back to the soldiers’ support efforts put on by schools in town.

“They were wonderful efforts, but we never knew if they got the letters; we never knew if they got the care packages. We had no idea if we’d made the slightest bit of difference,” says Kathy.

Her father then asked her to think about what she did when she was feeling bad, and Kathy knew the answer: Get out on the water in a boat, something she’s been doing since she childhood.

“He said, ‘If you want to do something, take them fishing,’” says Kathy.

As a licensed U.S. Coast Guard charter boat captain, Kathy’s initial idea was to secure the needed licenses and permits, and use her annual tax refund to offer a free catch-and-release fishing trip program to vets. She brought the idea to two of her good friends and former NBIS colleagues, Robert Hibson (also a veteran staff sergeant) and Debra Stone.

“What they should have said is, ‘What? Are you nuts?’” says Kathy, laughing. “That’s what your good friends should say. What your extra-good friends will say is, ‘I’m in!’ And they did! They both were instrumental in getting me started.”

Kathy also thanks North Branford veteran (a master sergeant) Cliff Potter for helping get things underway in 2007. By the summer of 2008, she’d secured the licenses and permits needed to allow her parents’ rare downeast sportsfisherman, the Black Mariah, to take vets out fishing. But Kathy still faced another hurdle: Getting veterans’ organizations and groups to take her offer seriously.

Not only is it highly unusual to find female captains in the world of commercial fishermen, but it was also “hard to get people to come with me because I’m a civilian,” Kathy says. “I had no contacts with the veterans’ community, because I had never served. So they didn’t believe me, and I don’t blame them!”

Kathy kept trying. Thanks to friends with veterans’ group connections, it finally happened. It took about two years, but through a volunteer fishing crew member who had a contact with the West Haven Veterans Center, Kathy was able to secure her first group of six. All of the veterans had recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. That first veterans’ group set off from the dock with their chaperones, Kathy, and the volunteer crew for a sunset trip in July 2009. The rest, as they say, is history.

“The striped bass were still all over the place in 2009, and they were hitting like crazy. We planned for a four-hour trip, and we stayed out for six,” says Kathy.

Expanding the Mission

The success of that trip inspired Kathy to find a way to offer more trips by bringing together many captains working on boats out of multiple ports, and that’s how she decided to found non-profit V.A. Charters. As Kathy worked to build support for the new non-profit, NBIS and the greater North Branford public school community pitched by putting on fundraising dodgeball tournaments across several grades.

“The first couple of years, I would say half of the funds we raised came from this school system,” says Kathy. “That’s how the kids found out what I was doing.”

Since that time, V.A. Charters has grown to include five captains running charters in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Maine, to date. Kathy and her four volunteer captains have all experienced what she calls “goose-bump” stories about the restorative power of bringing veterans together on the water.

“The chance to kind of spend time with other people who really understand your service experience can go a long way to patching some really painful wounds,” says Kathy. “I can’t help them that way, but I can create an environment in which it can happen.”

Kathy thanks her captains, their crews, and V.A. Charter’s three-person board of directors for their support. As part of her work to have V.A. Charters continue its mission and grow, she would welcome the help of a volunteer grant writer; for more information, email kgranfield@veterananglercharters.org. For more information on V.A. Charters, or to make a tax-deductible donation, visit www.veterananglercharters.org.