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GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Marist professor & Navy veteran

Tommy Zurhellen walks across America to draw attention to veteran suicide

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GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Marist professor & Navy veteran **Tommy Zurhellen** walks across America to draw attention to veteran suicide

Veteran suicide claims the lives of approximately 22 military men and women every day. But one man, Navy veteran Tommy Zurhellen, decided to do something to raise awareness and money to combat this tragic loss of life by embarking on a cross-country odyssey that so far has raised more than \$50,000 and garnered national media attention.

Zurhellen, an associate professor of English at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, for 15 years, took a sabbatical in April to embark on his "Walk Across America" in Portland, Oregon. He completed the 2,860-mile trek by returning to the Hudson Valley on Aug. 23. Zurhellen walked 22 miles each day, signifying the fact that 22 veterans take their own lives every day. He called his largely self-funded effort "VetZero" in the hopes that the number of suicides can eventually be reduced to zero.

"The Walk is over, but our journey is just beginning to help our veterans here at home and, hopefully, across America," Zurhellen notes. "The Walk was physically exhausting, but mentally I actually feel more energized than when I started back in April, because so many people have been supportive of the project. We're going to build on that momentum and keep raising awareness on these issues until we reach zero!"

Zurhellen served two tours on the Navy cruisers USS *Truxtun* and USS *California* as a nu-

clear electrician in the Persian Gulf from 1991 to 1996. He says he became aware of the challenges facing many veterans when he became commander of the Poughkeepsie Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) post two years ago. "That experience has really opened my eyes as to how much support our local veterans need, in the areas of mental health and homelessness," he says. "Although I'm a veteran, I really had no idea how bad it was: 22 veteran suicides in America every day, and over 40,000 veterans who are homeless each night. I became frustrated because we couldn't help everyone. So I took that frustration and came up with VetZero as a way to raise awareness on a national level about these issues, with a goal of zero suicides, and zero homelessness."

The initial VetZero fundraising goal of \$40,387 was chosen because it represents the average number of homeless veterans in America on any given night, according to a 2016 VA report. So far, the effort has raised more than \$50,000, which will go to two Poughkeepsie nonprofit programs that help veterans with mental health issues and homelessness, Vet 2 Vet Peer Mentoring and Hudson River Housing. Contributions came from Marist College and from private individuals following Zurhellen's journey on social media (facebook.com/veteranzero/) and a dedicated GoFundMe page (gofundme.com/f/vetzero).

Zurhellen points out that today's veterans face many challenges and hurdles when return-



Marist professor Tommy Zurhellen arrives in Poughkeepsie, New York.

PHOTOS: Carla de Jesus/Marist College

The Sad Statistics

- There were more than 6,000 veteran suicides each year from 2008 to 2016.
- In 2016, the unadjusted suicide rate among veterans was 30.1 per 100,000, while the rate among non-veteran adults was 16.4 per 100,000. In 2016, the age- and gender-adjusted rates of suicide were 26.1 per 100,000 for veterans and 17.4 per 100,000 for non-veteran adults.
- In 2016, the suicide rate was 1.5 times greater for veterans than for non-veteran adults, after adjusting for age and gender.
- In 2016, 69.4 percent of veteran suicides resulted from a firearm injury.
- The suicide rate for veterans ages 18-34 increased substantially, from 40.4 suicide deaths per 100,000 population in 2015 to 45 suicide deaths per 100,000 population in 2016.
- After adjusting for age, in 2016, the suicide rate for women veterans was 1.8 times greater than the suicide rate for non-veteran women.

Source: VA National Suicide Data Report, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs



Tommy Zurhellen speaks to the crowd during a campus homecoming celebration.

ing to society. "The transition for our veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan is much different than our older veterans," he explains. "Soldiers and sailors today deploy multiple times in an enlistment, and they often spend most of their career overseas. So when they return, the transition can be rough because many young veterans do not have a support system in place. We need to recognize that and do a better job of making sure our returning heroes have the resources they need.

"Veterans need to talk to other veterans," Zurhellen continues. "They need to talk with other folks who speak the same language and have had the same experiences. To a veteran, stories are kind of sacred, so they don't share them with just anyone. As a veteran, I understand that dynamic. Military life is tough. In the Navy, you can't explain what it is like to live and work on a ship or submarine in the Persian Gulf for six months to someone who wasn't there. It doesn't translate."

Although the Walk Across America has ended, Zurhellen says he is continuing to look for



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ways to raise awareness and funding to prevent veteran suicide and homelessness. "We'll have to think of something to top the feat of walking across the country for next summer," he remarks, adding, "One thing is for sure: we'll keep working to make sure every person knows about the numbers of 22 and 40,000 so we can all work together to do a better job for our heroes." 