

SOME 5,000 PARTICIPANTS

Take A Vet Fishing honors retiring co-founder Jeff Buggee

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — Amid an atmosphere of good cheer and a lavish buffet of Christmas fare at its holiday luncheon at First Congregational Church of Branford last Saturday, Take a Vet Fishing recognized the contributions of co-founder Jeff Buggee, who announced that, after three unsuccessful back surgeries, he's retiring to undergo a fourth.

Buggee "poured his heart and soul into TAVF for 12 years and pointed the way for all of us," said Ray Luhn who, along with Buggee, founded the program in 2007, with a mission to engage and provide fellowship to disabled and recovering veterans.

During its first year, 12 veterans from the West Haven Veterans Affairs Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Center participated in the program.

"Our goal was 35," Buggee told the lively crowd.

"We had car washes, we sold chocolate bars, we even passed a hat at some of the events."

Evidently it worked. Last April, the program celebrated its 5,000th participant.

Given the number of disabled veterans is on a steep rise, as a report from the National Veterans Foundation shows, perhaps the surge in popularity is no surprise. There's also evidence that the fine motor skills used in fishing can help alleviate symptoms of PTSD, according to theveterans-site.com.

For Jay Johnson, who suffered from PTSD from his years serving the Army in the war-torn region of Kosovo, it's far simpler than that. "I didn't get treated for my symptoms until I got to the West Haven VA in 2010 and I was in a pretty bad way," he said. "When I'm out on the water in the open air, I feel safe and I feel joy."

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Take a Vet Fishing co-founder Jeff Buggee

That's in accord with what Buggee told the group. "We hear back from staff and doctors at the VA who overhear veterans still talking about a TAVF event that occurred a month earlier," he said. "We just look at each other and go wow. We never ever could have expected this."

In the end, he said, "I've gotten a lot more out of this than all of you. This has given me the chance to thank you for all you've done."

At which point someone in the crowd stood up. "Every one of us

who's disabled in this room, we get surgery's no joke and a lot of us have prayers for you and best wishes. And thanks for all you've done."

"Oo-rah," someone else shouted, as the group rose in thunderous applause.

For additional information, visit Take A Vet Fishing on Facebook or contact Ray Luhn at rayluhn@gmail.com. Checks may be sent to First Congregational Church, 1009 Main St. Branford, CT 06405. Make payable to FCCB/TAVF.



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Left to right, CT veterans enjoying the TAVF holiday luncheon included Ron Buxton, Army; Don Buxton, Army; Philip Sirois, Army (in red hat); Stuart Palmer, Army; Lucius Warfield, Army; James Dudley, Marines; David Bowen, Marines; and James Lloyd, Air Force.