

GONE FISHIN'

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'The one we wait for all year'

Take A Vet Fishing hosts trip at Branford Yacht Club on Sept. 22

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — Just past noon on an overcast Saturday in September, a shout rang out from a large rock overlooking Long Island Sound, carrying across a loose scattering of picnic tables and through the heady aroma of burgers in the salt air.

Forty-five heads turned in its direction. West Haven's Tere McCormack, an Air Force veteran, held up a porgy in triumph. Everyone cheered.

It was yet another high-

spirited — and well-attended — Take A Vet Fishing event at Killam's Point Conference Center in Branford, one of the 16 to 18 organized by TAVF, and the last before the highly anticipated fishing trip at Branford Yacht Club on Saturday.

"All of these are great, but that's the highlight," said Alcides "Al" Robles, who served in the Army in Vietnam and Cambodia, as he settled by the bank in his wheelchair, crocheting a lap blanket, his fishing pole wedged between two rocks, the line bobbing in the motionless water. "It's the one all of us wait for all year."

Robles learned crocheting from his mother, Tomasa. These days he gets

yarn from the senior center in Rocky Hill. He finds it therapeutic. "It gets you away from everything," he said. He learned fishing from his friend E.C. Coachman, who stood beside him, bantering with fellow Army veterans Greg Sayles and Buffert Brooks and waiting for a tug on his line.

"Just the idea of being out here, getting out of the house, being in the open air, it feels good, said Coachman, who met Robles while the two were in transitional housing in Manchester. "It clears your mind."

That pretty much sums up the mission of TAVF, which started as an outreach program by the First

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Air Force veteran Jay Johnson, left, and Army veteran Rafael Reyes at Killam's Point at a recent Take A Vet Fishing event.

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Congregational Church of Branford in 2007 as a way to engage and provide fellowship to disabled and recovering veterans, and in April 2017 celebrated its 5,000 participant.

"Groups like this helped me back," said Jay Johnson, who suffered from PTSD from his years in the Army in the war-torn region of Kosovo. "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. Out here I feel safe and I feel joy."

Johnson's experience is precisely "the reason we do what we do," said founding member Don Potter, seated among a group of convivial volunteers around a picnic table as gulls swooped above and the sun peeked out from behind a cloud.

"It's also the reason we have a larger turnout than expected today, which is not unusual for us."

One of the reasons, at least. Another is that the numbers of disabled veterans are on a steep rise, a report from the National Veterans Foundation shows. There's also evidence that the fine motor skills used in fishing can help alleviate symptoms of PTSD, according to theveterans-site.com.

That's why Elliott Hastings, the chaplain of Branford VFW Post 12106, which sponsored the event, got his members involved. "It's a way to give a lift to guys who haven't had the easiest time since they've been back," he said, acknowledging East Haven's Aniello's Italian Restaurant for catering the event and volunteers like Sarah Tiffany, of Branford.

Tiffany's father, Bernie Callahan, was a veteran of World

War II. "He heard about Take A Vet Fishing, but he was too sick at the time to take part," she said. "I'm doing this in his honor."

Back near the rocks, Tere McCormack was still exhilarated. "It's the first fish I've caught since I was 10 years old," he said, a broad smile spreading across his face. "I'm having so much fun. I don't know why I didn't do this sooner."

► For information, visit Take A Vet Fishing on Facebook or contact Jeff Buggee at 203-488-7201. Checks may be sent to First Congregational Church, 1009 Main St., Branford CT 06405. Make payable to FCCB/TAVF. ► The seventh annual Take A Vet Fishing trip at Branford Yacht Club, 39 Goodsell Point Road, sets sail at dawn on Saturday. Cookout and awards follow.

Lisa Reisman may be reached at lisa@reisman27@gmail.com.



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From right, veterans Buffert Brooks, Greg Sayles, E.C. Coachman and Alcides Robles enjoy a day of fishing at Killam's Point in Branford.