



Ray Luhn / Contributed photo

Veterans at the recent Take A Vet Fishing event at Killam's Point in Branford.



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Army veteran Stephanie Covington, right, at the recent Take A Vet Fishing event at Killam's Point in Branford.

# Fishing event offers veterans 'a sense of peace'

7/23/21

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — It was Stephanie Covington's first experience fishing.

"I'm loving life," the Army veteran proclaimed on a recent Saturday, as she settled on a chair overlooking the Sound, fishing pole in hand, at a Take A Vet Fishing (TAVF) outing at Killam's Point in Branford.

That pretty much sums up the mission of TAVF, which started as an outreach program by the First Congregational Church of Branford in 2007 as a way to engage and provide fellowship to disabled and recovering veterans.

"The idea was to get them in the open air for a relaxing day of fishing and provide everything, including equip-

ment, food, and drink," said board member Ray Luhn, as the heady aroma of burgers on a grill wafted through the balmy air. In 2017, TAVF celebrated its 5,000th participant.

The burgers were part of the lavish spread of food provided by the Branford Rotary Club, a sponsor of the event.

A member of a military family, Covington enlisted in the Army at 18. After serving for three years, she said she struggled with substance abuse and, for a time, was homeless. She beat her addiction, and for the last eight years she's worked with other veterans. Last year, she bought her own home. "From homeless to homeowner," she said.

Covington said "getting



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Dick Mangione, John Barr, and Bob Mangione, DEEP CARE volunteers at the Take A Vet Fishing event.

out and participating in the community were key" to her recovery, and she's preached the same to her veterans. She'd been invited to TAVF events in the past, but she kept putting it off.

"I've just always have too much going on," she said, adding that she recently graduated from the Lived Experience Transformational Leadership program at Yale Medical School and is

**"People kept coming up and asking me, 'Do you need anything, do you need water, coffee, what can I get you?' I don't think in all my years since I served I experienced anything on that magnitude. Just feeling recognized, taken care of, and being out in the open air on the water, you just feel a sense of peace."**

Stephanie Covington, Army veteran

completing her bachelor's degree in business administration with a concentration in human resources at Southern New Hampshire University.

Something changed on

Saturday morning. "I just woke up and said to myself, 'You gotta slow down and go relax and enjoy life,'" she said.

Still, she felt "a little apprehensive driving up the back road, like what have I gotten myself into," she recalled.

From the moment she stepped onto the grounds, "I felt welcome," she said, as gulls swooped overhead. "They gave me a pole and a place to sit and showed me how to put a worm on, and cast out. And people kept coming up and asking me, 'do you need anything, do you need water, coffee, what can I get you.'"

"I don't think in all my years since I served I experienced anything on that magnitude," she said. "Just feeling recognized, taken care of, and being out in the open air on the water, you just feel a sense of peace."

For Winsted's Dick Mangione, that's the point. A volunteer with DEEP's Connecticut Aquatic Resource Education (CARE), he's been volunteering year-round to teach residents, and particularly kids, the ins and outs of fishing since 1987.

"It's the joy of giving back," he said, as cheers erupted from a rocky outcropping. "He caught a porgy," someone shouted.

"We're here to support veterans for all they do, to show our respect for all they've sacrificed," said Mangione, who was accompanied by his brother Bob and West Hartford's John Barr, also DEEP CARE volunteers.

"That's why we drove 80 miles this morning. We can't do enough for them."

► For additional information, visit [tavf.org](http://tavf.org), Take A Vet Fishing on Facebook, email [jaarnson@triumphgroup.com](mailto:jaarnson@triumphgroup.com), or contact Ray Luhn at 203-675-3266. Checks (payable to TAVF) may be sent to Take A Vet Fishing, P.O. Box 664, Branford 06405. TAVF is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.