The cycle of giving back

Navy veteran pays forward his thanks for DAV claims assistance through DAV 5K

Assistant Supervisor David Fitzgerald celebrates his U.S. Marine Corps recruit training graduation with his mother Annie in 1996. After plans for a full military career were derailed due to injury, Fitzgerald became a DAV national service officer, continuing his life’s mission of serving others.

I wanted to give up,” recalled Navy veteran John Meade, whose long fight for adequate disability benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs had left him not only frustrated but also facing financial hardship. “I was so angry at the whole VA system.”

Meade was receiving minimal disability compensation and needed a rating increase that more accurately reflected his service-
connected illness and injury. After initially working with a private attorney but learning no progress had been made on his appeal, he decided to seek assistance from the DAV national service office in Boston in 2012.

There he met National Service Officer David Fitzgerald, who went to work righting the wrong.

A Marine Corps veteran, Fitzgerald is no stranger to overcoming adversity. An injury derailed his own plans for a full military career, but the same injuries that forced him out of the Marine Corps ultimately led him to a new civilian career.

After getting help to file for an increase in his benefits compensation, he joined the DAV national service team in 2010 and was able to continue his life’s mission of serving others.

For Meade, Fitzgerald diligently spent years following up with phone calls, emails and paperwork, closely monitoring the veteran’s appeal. Finally, he was able to inform Meade he was awarded service connection for headaches, with an effective date a decade prior, along with Individual Unemployability benefits.

But the initial relief Meade felt was short-lived. Though he soon began receiving his monthly benefits, the retroactive award was being withheld. The VA claimed incompetency to handle funds, which resulted in a hold on Meade’s retroactive benefits. Fitzgerald immediately questioned the incompetency proposal and that Meade still received monthly benefits but not the retroactive award. He worked with the VA to schedule a new competency exam and contacted Meade’s longtime mental health physician to weigh in.

The new competency exam resulted in a favorable outcome for Meade, but he still failed to receive his retroactive benefits. Fitzgerald refused to give up and continued to advocate for Meade’s case.
After years of fighting and frustration, Meade received his lump sum in 2017.

“I think it was so stressful for him, and until he came to DAV, he felt like no one would help him,” said Fitzgerald. “We listened to him and refused to give up. I think he appreciated what we did for him.”

David Fitzgerald and his daughter, Rylie, smile before the start of the Boston DAV 5K. For a second year, the Boston national service office put together a team for the annual fundraiser and race. The team received an unexpected donation when Navy veteran John Meade decided to show his thanks for benefits assistance through a race contribution.
In thanks, Meade insisted on a show of gratitude with a monetary donation through the Boston DAV 5K National Service Officer team. The team was later recognized as a top fundraiser for the race.

“I was so grateful for David Fitzgerald and DAV; they were the only ones who truly cared about helping me through the process,” said Meade.

“It meant a lot to me and the team,” said Fitzgerald. “John wanted to assist DAV in helping other veterans in the same way we helped him.”

Fitzgerald was honored by the gesture and said he understood the desire to give back all too well.

“DAV helped me and now I help other veterans. Giving back is so rewarding,” said Fitzgerald. “Any veteran that comes in and we can provide life-changing assistance, I’m grateful. I love what I do.”

And with individuals like Meade helping to support DAV through initiatives like the DAV 5K, Fitzgerald and service officers throughout the country can assist even more veterans.

“The DAV 5K is a run to honor veterans, not only by honoring the men and women who served on race day but by supporting DAV’s life-changing programs that serve more than a million veterans each year,” said DAV National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster, who participated in the San Antonio DAV 5K. “For a veteran to use that race to selflessly honor his brothers- and sisters-in-arms epitomizes the spirit of the DAV 5K and the veterans it supports.”