

Sharing Insight to Help a Combat Veterans-Focused Alumni Program

THROUGH VARIOUS OPPORTUNITIES, Ag Leadership alumni have been able to stay connected; continue their leadership growth through lifelong learning; engage with other alumni, fellows and leaders; and share their time and talent with CALF. Likewise, the skills and structure of CALF have proven valuable in other organizations.

As a former CALF board chair and longtime supporter, John Lake (Honorary Fellow) understands and appreciates the importance of Ag Leadership alumni engagement – so much so, that he wanted another organization to learn and adopt “best practices” from CALF.

John and his wife, Sheila, who now split their time between California and Montana, have been involved with Warriors & Quiet Waters (WQW), a nonprofit combat veterans service organization, since 2014.

WQW helps post-9/11 wounded combat veterans find their purpose back in civilian life by providing them and their loved ones a place to thrive and find peace, meaning and purpose through fly fishing and other inspirational activities in nature.

Using the Ag Leadership alumni model as a successful example, John Lake suggested creating an alumni program to the WQW executive director, retired U.S. Marine Corp Col. Brian Gilman. Lake eventually connected Casey Giles of WQW with CALF Alumni Engagement Manager Deanna van Klaveren (32). Their collaboration greatly accelerated the concept into reality.

WQW started with a blank slate for its alumni program, which aimed to create more opportunities for connection, continued education and long-term growth. According to van Klaveren, Giles’s main purpose was to reengage program participants as cohorts and keep them connected with WQW resources. Said van Klaveren, “Over a few Zoom calls with Casey, I was happy to be able to share some advice and answer questions about what is most effective with alumni engagement.”

Van Klaveren also offered an outline of the Ag Leadership alumni bylaws and governance documents as a guideline for Giles to use in developing the WQW programs.

Following these helpful conversations, WQW established regional cohorts – similar to Ag Leadership’s statewide model, but on a national level since WQW program graduates live throughout the U.S. The regional cohorts are beneficial for helping veteran alumni stay connected and keeping the WQW program sustainable. The alumni program also offers First Fridays-style sessions, an alumni newsletter, opportunities for alumni to give back by volunteering for WQW program

If you or someone you know is a combat veteran that is interested in participating in WQW, visit warriorsandquietwaters.org.

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activities and more. Staying engaged with other combat Purple Heart veterans helps each WQW cohort continue to heal and reintegrate back into civilian life.

“WQW and Ag Leadership are different types of organizations, but there are some similarities,” said Lake. “With both, there is a significant investment in each participant and there’s an expectation that we’ll have a positive return on that investment. You want the outcome for healing to be positive. Keeping alumni engaged for the long run and fostering team spirit and camaraderie are crucial. With our WQW alumni program, the warriors can continue their involvement in their respective regions and use their talents to make a difference.”

Lake continued, “Our goal is driven by a need to save and encourage combat veterans’ lives by helping them lift up one another. These heroes deserve our love and support as they recover from the trauma of injuries and cope with reentering civilian life. WQW also provides support and training for veterans’ caregivers. CALF staff support was accessed to assist Warriors & Quiet Waters; collaboration is what CALF exemplifies.” ♦

