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LOCALNEWS

Career and combat vet is new VSO

She says passion, experiences will help her help county vets

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

For Candance Ritch, all veterans are “my vets.” Her passion for veterans, whom she refers to as “her guys,” runs deep.

“God had a plan when He sent us up here,” said the newly appointed Koochiching County veterans service officer. “I didn’t know it at the time.”

Ritch was drawn from Texas to Borderland by her “grand babies,” who live in International Falls. She said her son-in-law Doug Silvers doesn’t like Texas, and she couldn’t face a twice-a-year drive to see her grandchildren. When her youngest daughter, and grandson, agreed to move from Texas to International Falls with Ritch and her husband, the deal was done.

She submitted her resignation to the United State Department of Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic in Fort Worth where she was working just one day after her daughter agreed to the move, Ritch said. And then she began making the plans that brought the family to the Falls just two months later. “I didn’t give anybody any chance to second think it,” she said.

In a county with more than 1,200 veterans, Ritch will be busy.

“Veterans are second only to my family,” she said. “Of course, God first, my family and my vets.”

It appears it takes one to know one, when it comes to veterans. Ritch has 26 years of service with the United State Army and U.S. Air Force, with a seven-year break during that time.

She said a previous Texas VSO’s treatment of certain era veterans and women wasn’t right. And she’s taken that experience as an example of how not to serve veterans.

A Desert Storm combat vet, military service may be Ritch’s blood. She says her birth father is retired U.S. Navy, her adopted father a World War II vet, her husband is a Vietnam vet, her son-in-law is medically retired Air Force vet.

“I joined because of the Vietnam era vets — they were my heroes,” she said. “I’ve got the love and the knowledge, plus working at the VA for five years.”

She joined the Air Force in 1980, and after seven years switched to the Army to fly helicopters.

“It was flippin’ awesome,” she said of her helicopter experience. “But a female pioneer in a man’s field was kind of hard, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

She retired in 2006 with her husband, who served as a “house husband and Mr. Mom.” during her military career. “He’s my rock.” She said it was clear that her two daughters relied on their father at a young age. On breaks from Desert Storm, Ritch said when her daughters had “boo boos,” they ran passed her to “daddy.” But as they grew into teenagers and now grown adults, she said she’s still mom, but also more of a friend.

Ritch said she’s been asked about how she will handle the cold temperatures of the Icebox of the Nation, but she said she knows cold as she lived in Minot, N.D., in addition to 11 years in Europe, a couple years in Okinawa, Japan, Korea and



Candance Ritch

in many places stateside.

But she says the small-town charm of Borderland, with it’s lack of traffic and other big city concerns, appeals to her.

Prior to starting her VSO job in November, with the resignation of former VSO Kathy Sikkila, she worked at UnitedHealthGroup and at Kmart.

“I love people,” she said of the work. “It’s not that I needed the money, I needed something to do.” Injuries forced her to leave UHG and Kmart, and she said she was going to remain retired and watch over her fifth grand baby, who was born in November.

“Well, I was retired for maybe six weeks — at the four week point three or four people in town who knew I was a vet told me (Sikkila) was retiring and said I should apply,” she said.

Ritch believes serving as Koochiching County’s VSO “was meant to be. I can’t express my passion enough for my guys, and gals, from your youngest 18-year-old PFC (private first class for civilians) to your 80-year-old general — I will take care of all of them equally and the same. And they’re paying me to do this. I am so excited about this.”

Her experiences and family military connections, she said, allows her to relate to all era and kinds of veterans.

She served in Bosnia in February 1999 and said “that was a bad, bad war — something you can’t imagine until you drive through and see all the buildings or the biggest cemetery in the world in less than eight years. It took up a whole mountain side.”

Her slight Texas drawl and reference to people as “Hun” is an affectionate affect for all — men, woman, young, old, vets and non vets. She says if it offends someone, it’s not intended.

Ritch says she wants veterans and their families to get familiar with her face. Toward that end, she said she’ll visit local Veterans of Foreign Wars clubs and will keep regular office hours. She encourages veterans to call for an appointment to allow her to find files and get information before she assists them.

She’s in the VSO office on the third floor of the courthouse from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, Call her at 283-1179. She encourages people to leave a message because she won’t answer if she’s meeting with a veteran, who she says deserves all her attention at that time. She pledges to return all messages, but it may be the next day.

The county’s van service is also a part of her work, she said. Veterans who need a ride must call her at least a week prior to the date they need it.

She’ll be taking some training to learn about obtaining state benefits for veterans, and said the knowledge gained at the VA outpatient clinic will assist her with the medical benefits.

Ritch said she wants vets to understand they deserve the assistance she can help them gain.

“I want the guys to be taken care of,” she said. “My main point to them, Vietnam or World War II — the older generation — is this is not a benefit, it’s not welfare, it’s not a handout, you’re not taking away from Tommy Joe who lost both legs, but if you were wounded or hurt, or for women and some men military sexual trauma, or PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), this is the government’s way of saying ‘thank you for your service. We’re so sorry you were injured.’ It’s an entitlement you have earned for serving your country.”

Superintendent suggests increases in revenue

Offering a retirement incentive package to eligible staff could save district money in the long run

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

Retirement incentive packages may be offered to eligible Independent School District 361 staff in an effort to address the district’s struggling financial situation.

During a special meeting of the Falls School Board Tuesday, Superintendent Nordy Nelson said the incentive packages, should the board choose to go that route, would be a way for the district to offset the more than \$480,000 the

district will lose in state funding with the loss of about 66 students since last spring.

“It will cost some money at first...but the long term has some saving there,” he said of the proposal.

Nelson gave no details Tuesday as to what would be involved in the packages, however, he said he has had experience with retirement incentives in other school districts in which he’s worked. Packages would be presented by union presidents to their respective members.

Tuesday’s session was the second of its kind for the board to begin the process of considering areas to which cost adjustments can be made. The superintendent told board members in a statement that the district is no longer in an arrangement where fund balances will grow. The present district offerings and activities cannot be sustained and still keep revenues over expenditures.

Last month, Nelson provided board members with a list he said he generated

himself, which highlight options for the board to consider that could save the district about \$717,800. The superintendent stressed items on the list, including staff reductions and eliminating two non-revenue athletic teams, were only options and didn’t need to happen all at once. Still, the cuts would enable the district to avoid dipping into its about \$3.8 million in reserve funds.

Another option in raising revenues, Nelson said, is asking local voters next November to increase the district’s operating levy to an additional \$300,000 over what the district currently has.

“That’s a possibility if the board wants to entertain that and ask for additional funds to offset some cost adjustments,” Nelson said.

On the same note, the superintendent reminded board members that option isn’t a for-sure deal. “There’s no guarantee it would pass.”



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