

Irish Waterdogs

High Springs Nonprofit Helps Veterans Heal

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

On the mornings of the kayak trips, the veterans are distant. As the volunteers welcome them to their day on the river, most stand alone. Most are quiet.

But the water heals and binds. The water brings the veterans together.

“At the end of the day, it’s all fist-bumps and high-fives and talking smack,” Dave McDaid said. “They’re with their own.”

McDaid runs the nonprofit Irishwaterdogs Warriors, which

takes veterans on outdoor trips as a form of recreational therapy. The nationwide organization, born in early 2010, is moving its headquarters from Jacksonville to High Springs.

It is the nonprofit wing of McDaid’s outdoor apparel store, Irishwaterdogs, which also hosts races, tournaments and climbs. The program has 16 branches in nine states — five just in Florida. The outdoor activities for the veterans vary based on location, but in North Florida, the veterans are almost always out on the river.

For Randy Sutton, 56, the trips

bring him home.

Growing up, Sutton’s weekends were spent out on the Chesapeake Bay in big fishing boats with his dad. After serving two years in the Marine Corps, Sutton struggled to find his place. He has begun to find it again, currently living at The HONOR Center, Gainesville’s veteran domiciliary, and working toward a degree in social work at Santa Fe College.

The Irishwaterdogs Warriors program has been a part of this journey.

“There’s an unconditional respect and love they show us as

PHOTO BY ALBERT ISAAC

Founder Dave McDaid in his Irishwaterdogs shop in High Springs.



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The Irishwaterdogs Warriors is a monthly program for veterans and first responders, focused on kayaking, fishing, hiking and camping, and outdoor photography. Kayaking and kayak fishing offers a low-impact adaptive sport with both mental and physical benefits. The outdoor activities for the veterans vary based on location, but in North Florida, the veterans are almost always out on the river.

veterans,” Sutton said. “It’s the first time most of these veterans come in contact with someone who doesn’t want anything from them.”

That selflessness has an impact on those who may be struggling with both physical and emotional wounds, PTSD being one of the most difficult.

The outdoors and the camaraderie among the veterans bring calm.

“The things that exist at the domiciliary don’t exist out there,” Sutton said.

A typical trip for the High Springs chapter would be a three-to four-hour kayak paddle down the Ichetucknee, ending in a cookout

for the veterans, their families and the volunteers.

McDaid wanted to emphasize that families of veterans are welcome, especially because many have already spent long times apart during deployment.

“They could be gone for two to three years, and their infants



IRISH WATERDOGS

High Springs +
Gainesville Chapter

**For companies, corporations
or individuals interested
in supporting The
Irishwaterdogs Warriors
Program, please contact
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McInerney: 352-317-7458.
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would've turned into toddlers," he said. "I always encourage them to come out to spend the day together."

The organization provides the equipment, everything from kayaks to fishing rods to transportation. For veterans with physical injuries such as missing limbs, kayaks are specially outfitted.

McDaid, a Dublin-born Irishman, has pulled heavily from his own resources to launch the nonprofit and keep it running at no cost to the veterans. Having come to the

United States while only in his 20s, McDaid may not be the obvious pick for an activist dedicated to veteran care.

But his relationship to the cause is personal, McDaid said.

He first moved to New York City from Ireland as a musician on tour. He fell in love with the city and knew he would stay.

His proximity to the events of 9/11 made it feel all the more real when men and women began coming home from combat years

later, many with emotional and physical damage.

McDaid saw a need he could fill. He could bring his love of the outdoors to struggling veterans. He would put on a few events here and there to share his passion, until eventually the success of his apparel company allowed him to file as an official nonprofit.

"It really gives them hope," McDaid said. "It changes the way they think about themselves and the way they think the



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVE MCDAID

Veterans and their family members are welcome and the trip typically ends with a cookout.

community views them.”

The program took off. In California, groups of veterans join in on mountain bike races. In Utah and Arizona, they head to the desert. In Miami, they take trips through the Everglades on airboats.

“In Florida, we do an awful lot of kayaking,” McDaid said.

Specifically in High Springs, there is a focus on recreational kayaking and nature photography.

McDaid has always been a kayaker. The reason he first moved to Jacksonville was its watery crevices — creeks, rivers, the Intracoastal Waterway, the ocean. On the weekends, he would head outdoors, but he found that resources were limited.

“I’d drive by a creek and then

go home to Google the best place to launch, but it wasn’t there,” McDaid said. “I got kind of frustrated with that.”

He began his own blog, talking about his experiences outdoors, mapping GPS coordinates and uploading pictures. His passion for being out on the water translated naturally to a passion for equipment. It began with a few shirts, and then grew into a full-on brand that also sponsored events.

“There were calls from all over the country, just because of the spirit of adventure of the whole thing,” McDaid said. “It grew and grew and grew — now it’s enormous.”

McDaid said he hopes that moving the headquarters to High Springs will mean greater involvement with

local VA groups, such as clinics and transitional housing units.

Therapists at the HONOR Center, such as Alea Karpf, praise the type of treatment Irishwaterdogs Warriors offers, especially because most centers do not have the level of resources to provide something similar.

The responses from the veterans have been warm and full of thanks.

Sutton recently sent a letter of appreciation to the organization.

“The next time you hear a vet laugh or see a vet smile, know that you of Irishwaterdogs are making a huge difference,” he wrote. “You are serving your country, just like these men and women are serving theirs.” ■