“Darrell Whitman - the man, the myth, the legend.” That is how one of Darrell’s former soldiers describes him on his LinkedIn. Over the past three years as the coordinator of the Gila River AmeriCorps Program, I can second that statement.

Darrell served two tours in Iraq as part of the Global War On Terror and worked his way up to Sergeant. Darrell experienced a great deal of tragedy and growth as part of his time deployed, and when he finally came back to the Gila River Indian Community as a civilian he knew that he wanted to give back to other Veterans.

Upon his return, he sought out ways to help local Veterans. He visited them at their homes, assisted them with transportation, and found other ways to be useful. In addition to volunteering during his free time, Darrell also worked full time in construction at jobs that would often take him out of the state for weeks at a time.

Eventually, Darrell joined the local American Legion Post, Haskell Antonio-Osife Post 51. As part of the post, Darrell sought out a leadership position to begin affecting change for Veterans. He saw a huge need for Gila River Veterans due to the few services available from the local government. Darrell and his brother Joey would often take time out from their Post duties to visit with Veterans and military families, to create new projects that identified and honored Veterans, and find ways to engage local Veterans and get them out of the house.

Darrell heard about the Gila River AmeriCorps programs at a recruitment visit to Post 51, and decided to check it out. When he heard that AmeriCorps was providing a professional and sustainable way to serve the Veterans and military families of Gila River, Darrell knew he wanted to be a part of the program.

Darrell has now been with the Gila River AmeriCorps program for three years. He is a team lead as part of a 3-person AmeriCorps team at one of the many service sites across Gila River. Darrell’s time in AmeriCorps has given him a tremendous amount of training and resources that he utilizes to help his local community, as well as practice self-care by taking advantage of his VA benefits and other resources.

In addition to his full-time AmeriCorps service, Darrell uses his free time to serve as an adjutant at the American Legion, volunteers at his church, helps with many different youth programs in his local community, and volunteers at multiple different boards and non-profits that serve Veterans inside and outside of the reservation. He also, somehow, fits in watching some classic Simpsons episodes in his packed and hectic schedule.

Darrell is one of the most passionate, selfless and service oriented people that I’ve had the pleasure of meeting. Through his military service, his community service, and his national service, I believe that Darrell Whitman exemplifies the ideals and the commitment to National Service that the Tom Harkin award was created for.