

Honoring Vets Through Flights

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Pictures and memorabilia from Midwest Honor Flight hang on the walls of Aaron Van Beek's home office.

HONORING VETS THROUGH FLIGHTS

Aaron Van Beek ('18) has been named Dordt's 2022 Horizon Award recipient.

This award identifies alumni who are community-minded and entrepreneurial—those who are using their knowledge, gifts, and talents to participate in God's redemptive work in the world.

"I am humbled to have been nominated and even more so to be the recipient of this year's Horizon Award," says Van Beek.

Van Beek is certainly community-minded and entrepreneurial. While studying elementary education at Dordt, Van Beek began the Midwest Honor Flight in 2017 after learning about the Honor Flight Network in Washington, D.C.

Today, Van Beek serves as board president and CEO for Midwest Honor Flight, an organization that flies "as many veterans from Northwest Iowa,

the state of South Dakota, Northeast Nebraska, and Southwest Minnesota to Washington, D.C., as we can find at no cost to the veteran."

"As a junior in college, I never would have imagined that this organization would grow so much and have a lasting impact on the lives of so many veterans," says Van Beek. "As of this fall, we have flown 1,153 veterans on 13 flights. It's truly an honor to be part of such a life-changing mission."

Despite having flown many veterans to Washington, D.C., Van Beek says there are over 700 veterans waiting for the opportunity to see and experience

LEARN MORE

To learn more about Aaron Van Beek, read "In Their Honor" from the fall 2021 issue of the Voice: dordt.edu/stories/in-their-honor.



the memorials in Washington, D.C.

"The harsh reality is that we are up against the clock and not every veteran that applies to go will get a chance," says Van Beek. "Wherever Defender Nation is, there are veterans

who have served or are serving and deserve the chance to see and reflect at the memorials that have been dedicated to their service. Nationwide, there are 10,000 that are on a waiting list throughout the 130 total groups."

Aside from a limited number of flights, what holds veterans back from participating? Some aren't aware that

Midwest Honor Flight exists. Others apply too late and find that all the seats on the flight are claimed. And there are other barriers.

"Our largest population are those who served in the Vietnam War," says Van Beek. "But they're also the ones that have the biggest health concerns from substances like Agent Orange exposure. It's so difficult when I get a phone call from a wife saying, 'My husband just passed away. He was really looking forward to going but won't get the chance.'"

Van Beek's hope is to "run out of veterans before I run out of money—to get every veteran that applies a chance to be considered for a flight."

To achieve that dream, Van Beek spends his days writing grants and working on building partnerships to make future flights possible. He also fields phone calls from veterans, making sure veterans have their correct paperwork in and have their questions answered about what flights entail. And that doesn't even include the work he does with planning, organizing, and executing flights.

Each mission is a one-day charter flight. Van Beek, the veterans, and volunteers spend 10 hours in Washington, D.C. visiting all the war memorials, watching the changing of the guard at Arlington National Cemetery, and taking a bus tour of downtown Washington, D.C. That evening, they fly back to the Sioux Falls airport.

"We want veterans to go on a Midwest Honor Flight with the expectation that they're going to see the memorials, but we want them to come out changed and healed from that experience," says Van Beek. "We want veterans to experience that sense of honor, respect, and closure."

Every trip is emotionally charged, not only for the veterans but for Van Beek.

"I think it's emotionally harder for me every flight we take. I've heard so many difficult stories from veterans of what

they went through 50 to 60 years ago and the pains they've dealt with since the war. But if I ever have a flight where I'm not emotionally attached, then I think it'll be time for me to step away."

In fact, it's veterans' stories that continually inspire Van Beek.

"What I really enjoy is that every single veteran has a story. Whether they served in country during the war or whether they were stateside, they have a common bond. And every single veteran that I've talked to knows someone

who made the ultimate sacrifice," he says. "Being able to hear their stories and, for some of them, finally opening up for the first time about what they experienced 50 years ago. It's a pretty powerful part of why we do the Midwest Honor Flight."

One of the challenges that

Van Beek and his team give veterans upon their return home is that "you have to tell your story."

"It doesn't have to be the whole story but start telling your story to your family. Because as soon as you pass away, that piece of our history also passes away. That's our biggest challenge that we give to these guys and gals when they return home."



During Defender Days, Van Beek gave a speech at the Defender Nation Dinner.

HONOR FLIGHTS

There are honor flights happening all over the country, and Van Beek encourages veterans to apply.

"And if you feel that to give toward any of the missions throughout the country, please do so," he adds. "It takes an army to make one of these flights possible."

Visit honorflight.org to find your local honor flight hub or visit midwesthonorflight.com for more information about the Midwest Honor Flight.

Looking back at his Dordt experience, Van Beek says that "Dordt is a community unlike any other."

"Between classes, majors, the arts, and athletics, students are very supportive of each other," he says. "I've made lifelong friends and keep in touch with many of them to this day."

Plus, when Van Beek began Midwest Honor Flight as a student, he felt supported by his professors and classmates.

"In fact, some of those professors and friends have helped serve as volunteers, as guardians, and as a part of our flight crew over these past missions and have had a chance to see firsthand what the Midwest Honor Flight is."

When Van Beek learned that he was the recipient of the Horizon Award, he felt humbled and grateful. In many ways, receiving the award is a full-circle experience for him, as he first reached out to the Honor Flight Network about starting the Midwest Honor Flight when he was a Dordt student.

"Some of my college friends are coming back to campus for Defender Days to celebrate with me, and some of those friends were in the room in Southview when I said, 'What do you think about starting an honor flight here in Northwest Iowa?'" he says. "Many of those friends helped with stuffing envelopes and mailing out flyers. To have them in the room cheering me on at the Defender Nation Dinner will be surreal."

SARAH MOSS ('10)