Building a Sense of Purpose
The Mission Continues exercises the leadership skills of vets

One of the ways new ideas spread is through their association with charismatic public figures. Habitat for Humanity first took off as an organization when, in 1984, former President Jimmy Carter volunteered to help out on one of its building projects. Eric Greitens, founder of the Mission Continues, has the sort of personal star power which has already begun to attract public and financial support for his new approach to helping veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan adjust to post-military life. Greitens is a former Navy SEAL and a former Rhodes Scholar.
He argues that the recent focus on treating veterans primarily as victims—whether of post-traumatic stress disorder or other maladies—may be not only expensive but counter-productive for the intended beneficiary. While, to be sure, veterans with severe psychological or medical problems need the clinical treatment they’ve been promised through the $136 billion-plus annual federal budget appropriation for the Department of Veterans Affairs, it’s Greitens’ view that these entitlements almost inevitably fail to address the deeper need of veterans seeking to build new lives: a sense of purpose.

Many Americans enter the military in the first place out of a desire to protect, to work in cooperative teams, to contribute to their nation, to serve a deeper cause than simple self-interest. “It is crucial,” says Greitens, “that veterans have the opportunity to satisfy their desire to serve.” The key to supporting many veterans, he says, is finding ways for them to continue to lead and help others—to extend “their mission of public service.”

The same impulse which brought these men and women to military service can thus power their new lives. Greitens is not shy about casting this as fundamentally different from the approach that many veterans’ lobbies and government agencies take. His alternative is based on the idea that “a veteran can build a successful transition not on things—benefits that they’ve been given—but on skills, and their desire to help.”

Tapping the Hunger to Serve a Purpose
In 2007, Greitens embodied his idea in a new organization. After returning from a deployment to Iraq, he used his combat pay to found the Mission Continues. The organization is different right from the beginning: its two-week orientation begins with a mass swearing-in. Once they are trained, participants begin their new “missions” with established public-service organizations—Big Brothers Big Sisters, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Habitat for Humanity, the Boys and Girls Clubs, the Red Cross, or a wide range of other national and local nonprofits.

Participants are called “fellows,” and they receive modest stipends drawn from the group’s annual $6 million budget to support them as they serve at least 24 hours every week, for 26 weeks. Most of the Fellows, though not all, have been designated as disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs. In effect, the Mission Continues assists these veterans by focusing them less on their problems than on their value to others, providing them with a path toward what Greitens calls “a renewed sense of purpose.”

Many participants subsequently return to school, start their own businesses, or become staff members at the organizations where they served their fellow-
A study conducted by the school of social work at Washington University tracked 52 alumni who completed the fellowship program between 2007 and 2010 and found that “71 percent had gone on to further their education and 86 percent have transferred their skills to civilian employment.”

More subjectively, the study found that “the majority of participants report that the fellowship helped them to become leaders within their communities (86 percent), and to teach others the value of service, and to sustain a role for service within their communities (91 percent).” Notably, some 64 percent of the fellows, almost all Iraq- and Afghanistan-era veterans, had been classified as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The Mission Continues, in other words, is taking on plenty of hard cases, and producing good results with them.

**Bridging the Military-civilian Divide**

Greitens’ mission goes beyond helping individual veterans. He also aims to change the public view of the 300,000 veterans who will be leaving the military in the coming three to five years from that of victims with special needs to one of “citizen leaders.” Toward that end, the Mission Continues fellows, staff, and volunteer recruiters help to lead large-scale nationwide “service days,” whose projects bring veterans together with legions of Americans who might otherwise never have contact with any of the 1 percent of their fellow citizens who serve in the military.

Recent service days saw veteran-led volunteers distribute supplies and help clean up in areas of New York City ravaged by Hurricane Sandy, while another group renovated a 4-H center in Bexar, Texas, where service dogs are trained. Fellows of the Mission Continues literally become squad leaders again, managing dozens of local volunteers in day-long and multi-day efforts. In the process, veterans make new friends and contacts, and everyday Americans view former military members in an entirely new light.

Service-day projects also link veterans directly with employees from many of the major corporations who provide most of the financial support for the
Mission Continues. Goldman Sachs and Goldman Sachs Gives, the charitable arm of the bank, have pledged $6 million to support the group’s fellowship program. The Home Depot Foundation donated $1.05 million to the organization in the latest year, and Home Depot employees joined forces with the Mission Continues on more than 300 community-service projects. Target has given $750,000 to the group in recent years, and the company’s employees have worked side-by-side with Fellows on many service projects. Additional supporters have included the Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation, the New Profit venture philanthropy fund, Novo Nordisk, JPMorgan Chase, Southwest Airlines, the Hauck Foundation, the Bob Woodruff Foundation, the Paul E. Singer Foundation and others.

With this support, the Mission Continues grew substantially during its first five years of existence. It started as a small local program in St. Louis. Today the organization has three offices, in St. Louis, Houston, and New York, from which it serves veterans in 43 states.

Defining Success as Many Local Achievements

Greitens is clearly interested in influencing America’s culture beyond the number of individuals touched directly by the Mission Continues. And he doesn’t judge achievement by how large his own program becomes. “Our measure of success is not to have one giant Mission Continues with 200,000 fellowships,” he says pointedly. He would be just as happy to inspire and influence others to start parallel programs, and he is actively working toward that end.

“We hope to have a high-impact, well-run nonprofit that produces outstanding results.” And he would be happy to be copied, “all over the country, in ways that make sense for individual communities.” One approach he’s now trying: to convince major national nonprofits, including Big Brothers Big Sisters and Habitat for Humanity, to incorporate a fellowship program for veterans right inside their hundreds of chapters. Changing the way America sees its veterans is the mission, and Greitens’ own group is just one instrument deployed toward that end.

(researched by Howard Husock)