

AT THEIR SERVICE

Dozens of organizations help military vets reintegrate into civilian life, learn new skills, and have a little more fun. These groups go above and beyond, and are among our most highly recommended.

By Jennifer Peters

GI Film Festival

GIFilmFestival.com

This annual event—which is held each May in Washington, D.C.—celebrates veterans with several days of armed-forces-themed films. The festival features work by veteran filmmakers as well as filmmaking veterans, and each year dozens of movies—everything from shorts to full-length features, comedies to documentaries—give insight into the multitude of military experiences. The festival typically includes several gala events to honor GIs, as well as special screenings for vets and their families, plus a filmmaking boot camp for aspiring auteurs.



Actor James McEachin at the GI Film Festival

Project Sanctuary

ProjectSanctuary.us

Understanding that the entire family experiences the stress of service, PS helps returning vets reconnect with their spouses and children. Primarily held in the Colorado Rockies, each weeklong retreat—paid for by sponsors—offers activities for the entire family, as well as classes on marriage, money, and family issues. The retreats are designed to encourage family togetherness and fun, in the hope that bonds will be strengthened and vets will find it easier to reintegrate into life at home. More than a dozen 2014 retreats are planned; dates and applications are available online.

The Rucksack

Rucksack.IAVA.org

This is part of the member programming for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and provides vets with rewards throughout the year, including event tickets, exclusive giveaways, one-of-a-kind opportunities, and more. Corporate sponsors provide tickets to baseball games and concerts, for instance, or a chance to have your face on a NASCAR vehicle, happy-hour events, and career coaching. Rewards can be claimed only by IAVA members, some are distributed via a lottery system, and there are frequent updates to the grab bag of available options.

Songwriting With Soldiers

SongwritingWithSoldiers.org

One of a growing number of organizations geared at helping veterans through the arts, SWS encourages participants to express themselves musically. Veterans are invited to attend retreats during which they work with professional songwriters to craft songs about their experiences, whether they occurred in combat or upon returning home. The songs are recorded by a team of musicians, and all participants receive CDs of their work. SWS works primarily with local VA hospitals and military bases to find participants, but visit the website for up-to-date information.

Tunnel to Towers

T2TRun.org

T2T, founded post-9/11 in honor of New York City firefighter Stephen Siller, raises money to support children who've lost parents in service to their country, as well as firefighters and members of the military injured in the line of duty. The group hosts a series of 5K runs each year to raise funds. While the premier event is, of course, in New York (and follows the Brooklyn-to-Manhattan route Siller took to the Twin Towers), there are runs held in a number of cities across the country each September.

Veterans in Film & Television

VFTLA.org

This Los Angeles-based organization, founded by Marine Corps vet, author, and actor Mike Dowling, provides networking opportunities for current and former service members who work, or aspire to work, in the film and television industry. At monthly networking events, such high-profile guests as comic-book legend Stan Lee, NBC Universal President Ron Meyer, and others speak to members. VFT also helps connect veterans to job opportunities within the industry.

Wounded Warrior Project

WoundedWarriorProject.org

WWP hosts numerous events each year for wounded soldiers. The Soldier Ride, a four-day cycling event, allows injured vets to participate with the use of various adaptive bicycles and equipment. Project Odyssey, a five-day retreat, helps vets overcome their residual combat stress, either with fellow warriors or as part of a couples' retreat with their spouses. The organization started a series of 8K runs in 2013 to raise funds—and awareness—to support its mission.

Warriors & Quiet Waters

WarriorsAndQuietWaters.org

Little is more relaxing than fly-fishing along a deep stream, miles from distractions. The WQW outfits participants with all they need to enjoy the experience. From May through October, it takes small groups of wounded vets on weeklong excursions in the Montana wilderness, teaches them to tie flies, and allows them to enjoy the serenity the experience provides. Most participants are chosen through references from medical professionals and military hospitals, but you can also apply online for a spot.



The Motor Rally at the 2013 National Veterans Wheelchair Games

National Veterans Wheelchair Games

WheelchairGames.va.gov

Both a competition and a rehabilitation program, the annual NVWG invites injured vets to participate in such sports as archery, basketball, hand cycling, quad rugby, softball, and swimming. Athletes of all skill levels—from professional-quality players to those who have never participated in a wheelchair sport before—take part, with the games attracting upward of 500 competitors each year and hundreds more spectators. The 2014 Wheelchair Games will take place in Philadelphia from August 12 to 17.



Honor Flight vets "stormed" the World War II memorial on October 1, during the government shutdown.

Honor Flight Network

HonorFlight.org

Catering to the older veteran population, HFN helps World War II veterans travel to Washington, D.C., to see the memorials dedicated to their service. The group started in 2005, and by the end of 2012, it had brought more than 98,500 veterans to D.C.—including during the government shutdown this past fall. The organization currently focuses on WWII vets, but plans to extend its network to include veterans of the Vietnam and Korean wars. Dates for trips, as well as locations of regional travel hubs, are available on the Honor Flight website.



Chad Jukes at Paradox's annual ice-climbing event in Ouray, Colorado

Paradox Sports

ParadoxSports.com

Founded by injured Army Captain D. J. Skelton (who made our 2011 badass list) and pro climber Tim O'Neill, PS hosts a number of ice-climbing, rock-climbing, paddle-boarding, and camping excursions each year for members of the disabled community—both veterans and civilians—along with several vet-specific rock-climbing events. Paradox aims to inspire and empower participants using adaptive equipment that helps them accomplish these physical feats. 