

MORE THAN A BACKPACK

One alumnus is working to change the conversation around veteran homelessness.

by Aranda H. Gehringer

Above: Brett D'Alessandro in Afghanistan.

Below: D'Alessandro has a passion for helping fellow veterans as they transition into their civilian lives.

A simple act of kindness can go a long way. Sergeant **Brett D'Alessandro** (Rhode Island, Kappa Iota '11) had recently returned from a six-month deployment to Afghanistan. As he made his way into his doctor's appointment, he encountered a man with a sign saying, "Homeless veteran. Please help." D'Alessandro went to his hotel room to grab supplies and a backpack to take back to the veteran. They exchanged a few words and went on with their days.

Three days later, he drove to the same doctor's office without much thought about the veteran. To his surprise, he spotted him outside again. This time, his young son stood beside him. The boy approached D'Alessandro. "Thank you for the backpack," he said thankfully. "Now I don't have to go to school carrying my books in my hands."

"Thank you so much for the warm layers," the veteran said to him. "They're going to keep my wife warm at the homeless shelter."

D'Alessandro was struck by the exchange. Struggling to find himself again after returning from war, he suddenly realized what he had to do.

"I found my mission again," he stated. "I wanted to do anything I could to get better so I could help veterans rehabilitate themselves and get their lives back."

It all started with that backpack.

...

D'Alessandro joined the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves shortly after high school. In fall 2011, he began attending the University of Rhode Island and soon joined PIKE. With the brothers of Kappa Iota Chapter, he found a familiar bond.

"To me, PIKE resembled the military. A band of individuals joined together for a common cause. I loved the community," he said.

D'Alessandro especially enjoyed the philanthropic aspect of the Fraternity and encouraged his brothers to get involved with military philanthropic efforts including Toys for Tots.

His time in the chapter and at the university was cut short during his sophomore year. D'Alessandro volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan with other members of his reserve unit. His PIKE brothers would support him from home while he fought alongside his fellow Marines.

He deployed to Camp Leatherneck, a forward operating base in Afghanistan, to work with a motor team unit. His unit retrograded smaller forward operating bases, and their responsibilities included acquiring supplies of value from the bases or passing them to the Afghan army.



Upon returning home, he described the feeling of being hit by a “grenade of anxiety.” Other members of his unit were also struggling. Their difficult deployment made transitioning back to the U.S. feel impossible. He and the individuals he fought alongside struggled with substance abuse and suicidal thoughts. After being placed on medical hold for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, D’Alessandro had begun programs to ease himself into the healing process. It was on his way to one of those doctor’s appointments that he met the homeless veteran and his son. He hadn’t realized so many other veterans were suffering.

“I thought it was only me and the Marines I deployed with who were dealing with this,” he shared. “We felt like cowards. We felt like, ‘We’re Marines. We served this country. We have no fear.’ And now we have this extreme anxiety. We can’t even get a haircut without having a mental breakdown. Who are we? In reality, many veterans deal with this.”

His girlfriend, Alexa Modero, was the first person he thought to call. Modero, an Alpha Phi alumna, and D’Alessandro met as students at Rhode Island. She had supported him during his deployment and upon his difficult arrival back home. He asked her what they should do, and she realized the importance of the backpack.

“You survived out of a backpack in Afghanistan. The backpack you gave to that man symbolizes a home for a homeless veteran,” she told him. “Let’s get some supplies, provide resources, and get some backpacks out there.”

They packed backpacks with rain ponchos, emergency blankets, soap, deodorant, and numerous veterans’ resources and never looked back.

...

“We’re taught in bootcamp to be strong, to not show weakness, to be a leader. When we come back home, we’re hit with all these different emotions and just push them to the side because we don’t want to show weakness,” D’Alessandro stated. “Asking for help is a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness.”

To date, Backpacks For Life has distributed 5,300 backpacks to homeless veterans. After witnessing



Above:
D’Alessandro and his fellow Marines

Below:
D’Alessandro and Alex Modero received a Vetty Award for their work to end veteran homelessness.

firsthand what veterans needed to survive and get off the streets, D’Alessandro and Modero developed a new backpack: the Bowery Pack. The Bowery Pack is unique in design with features such as a cell foam sleeping mat that prevents hypothermia, reflective material to protect veterans from nearby vehicles, and a locking cable to keep belongings safe.

Through a program by One Veteran at a Time (OVAAT), the Bowery Packs are produced in the U.S. by military veterans transitioning into the manufacturing industry. This full circle experience ensures that Backpacks For Life is serving all veterans. The Bowery Pack has risen in popularity with outdoor adventure seekers due to the organization’s giving model. Every backpack purchased provides a backpack, filled with supplies, for a veteran in need.

“When you give veterans something of quality, like the Bowery Pack, it resonates with them. They receive this amazing backpack and think, “Wow, I must be an amazing, quality person,” D’Alessandro said.

...

The work doesn’t stop with backpacks. Backpacks For Life provides resources, coaching, and support





Below: The Bowery Pack is unique in design with many features to assist veterans. "When you give veterans something of quality, like the Bowery Pack, it resonates with them. They receive this amazing backpack and think, "Wow, I must be a quality person," D'Alessandro said.

to veterans in need to help prevent homelessness or suicide. They tour nationally working with organizations, supplying them with backpacks, and coaching them how to effectively work with veterans. Their national partners span across 14 states.

"It's easy for a veteran to feel lost in the system. There are amazing resources out there, but it can be overwhelming trying to navigate it alone," D'Alessandro said. "We're here to guide them."

D'Alessandro and Modero welcome veterans into their home to draft resumes, fill out paperwork, and apply for housing. They transport veterans to job interviews, assist them in getting their drivers licenses, and connect them with drug and alcohol counseling. Most importantly, they spend quality time with them.

"Before we can set them up with jobs or homes, we have to reignite their flame for life. We make them feel human again and build a connection with them," he said. "You can't just hand them resources and say, 'Good luck!' You have to understand how they got to this point."

Around 350 veterans have benefitted from Backpacks For Life's resources. And their services don't stop with the veteran. Backpacks For Life also focus on helping family members adapt. By connecting

families to counseling opportunities, finding school supplies for children, or guiding the transition into a new home, D'Alessandro and Modero touch lives.

"It's like a house burning down and only trying to rebuild one side. You have to rehabilitate not only the veteran, but the family and friends, too," he shared.

...

In 2019, Backpacks for Life became a top 15 finalist for the StreetShares Foundation Burt Williams Memorial Small Business Veteran Award. The top three finalists, selected by fans, would travel to Washington D.C. to compete in a pitch competition to win up to \$25,000. They would need votes, and D'Alessandro knew he could call on his PIKE brothers.

Brothers of Kappa Iota Chapter voted daily. Pikes from across the country placed their votes and helped spread the message. Once their spot in the top three was secured, the team traveled to D.C. for the pitch. Backpacks For Life was awarded second place, earning \$15,000 for their work to end veteran homelessness.

Both undergraduate members and alumni of Kappa Iota Chapter continue to show their support for Backpacks For Life by donating to the cause and promoting their efforts online. The chapter partnered with the university's chapter of Alpha Phi to host a philanthropy event and raised over \$2,000 for the organization.

...

The future looks bright for Backpacks For Life. They're excited to expand their backpack distribution and reach even more homeless veterans. As they connect with more veterans' organizations across the country, they will equip even more communities with backpacks.

Their mentorship and coaching process will soon be accessible online. In this exciting development, veterans from across the country will be able to utilize the organization despite their location. Through this growth, D'Alessandro's focus remains on bringing hope back into the lives of veterans.

"I recently told a veteran that we had gotten him housing. He had such an awkward smile when I told him. That smile was awkward because it's like a broken arm. You forget how to move a broken arm after being in a cast for a while," D'Alessandro said. "He's learning how to smile again. There's nothing more rewarding than that."

For more information about Backpacks For Life, visit www.backpacksforlife.org. ❖



The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans estimates that 40,056 veterans are homeless on any given night in the U.S. The suicide rate among veterans is staggering: a 2012 report from the Department of Veterans Affairs states that 22 veterans succumb to suicide every day. Some sources believe this rate may be undercounting suicides.