



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Mark Grisanti

Joseph Ruszala

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Award: Honoring Our Veterans

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On a particularly distressing night, while under attack, a young 25th Infantry Division American Soldier in Vietnam named Joseph Ruzala wondered if he would make it home alive, and if he did, what his life would become. Today, nearly 40 years later, that young soldier, who did survive and return to Western New York, is being honored and recognized for his remarkable community service.

Following his retirement from a local company, Joe began volunteering with Veteran Service Organizations because he felt the need to make a difference in helping veterans of all generations. Joe saw opportunities while volunteering, and began to facilitate relationships among community members and military veterans in need. Joe got involved with other Vietnam veterans and their group, "Pathfinders," that collaborates with the Department of Veteran Affairs on highly successful outreach events. From these events, Joe would often individually follow up with community partners, bringing vets in need to services, particularly Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

With each veteran Joe was able to assist, his enthusiasm and motivation to help increased. He has become an indispensable volunteer with the Department of Veteran Affairs, Buffalo Vet Center, where he attends numerous outreach events and provides much mentorship for veterans in a kind, caring and compassionate manner that is always well-received.

After Vietnam, Joe found much comfort from his pets; knowing this, he had an idea to get OIF/OEF and other Veterans coping with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) paired up with supportive animals. From this idea, Joe and others partnered with the local SPCA, creating a program called, "Dog Tags Niagara." Veterans and staff work with each other to emotionally heal wounded animals, in turn, providing much healing for the vets.

Wherever there is an event, no matter how large or small, if it relates to assisting veterans, Joe will be there – sharing his energy and true caring for others. Far away from the battlefields of Vietnam, Joe can be proud of the life he has lived and is a true inspiration to all that know and work with him.