

INDULGE TOLEDO

Dine 419: Area restaurants team with Veterans Matter to help house local vets

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Area restaurants are joining the fight against veteran homelessness with Dine 419, a new week-long restaurant fundraising event taking place Feb. 23-March 1. The event will benefit Veterans Matter, a national charity founded and still based in Toledo.

Ken Leslie started Veterans Matter in 2012 with the mission to help house homeless veterans.



Ken Leslie, founder of Veterans Matter. Toledo Free Press File Photo by Joseph Herr.

"It's a program that has gone viral and has now housed 517 vets in seven states," Leslie said. "Dine 419 is a partnership between Veterans Matter, our generous sponsors and all the restaurants in the community who care about veterans."

Participating restaurants include The Beirut, The Black Pearl, The Blarney Irish Pub, Burger Bar 419, Byblos, Forrester's on the River, Hollywood Casino Toledo (Final Cut Steak & Seafood and Scene), Jed's, Jim Shull's Rib Cage, La Scola Italian Grill, McDonald's, Poco Piatti, Table Forty4 and Ye Olde Cock n' Bull.

Moussa Salloukh, co-owner of both Burger Bar 419 and La Scola, said he's honored to support local veterans.

"It's something we're happy to be part of, to give back to our veterans," he said. "They put everything out on the line for us, so we're honored to give back to them. It's our pleasure. We're all about local and this supports buying local, so it's a great cause all around."

More restaurants and sponsors are expected to join the event that gives patrons an opportunity to visit old favorites or explore new venues, all while supporting a good cause.

Presenting sponsor Hollywood Casino Toledo was quick to support the efforts of Veterans Matter.

"Honestly, it's a good cause and it's going back to a good organization," said Keira Finnegan, advertising and promotions manager.

Other sponsors include Monroe Dodge, VFW Post 2898, Bottomline Ink, *Toledo Free Press*, WTOL-11, Fox Toledo, iHeartMedia, Cumulus Toledo and toledo.com.

Veterans Matter's parent organization 1Matters first received support from musician John Mellencamp, who visited Leslie's Tent City in 2007 while on a tour stop in Toledo. Tent City, which raises awareness of homelessness and helps connect those in need with services, first took place in 1990 in Downtown Toledo.

Word of mouth spread to others in the music and entertainment industry, and before long Leslie had connections with other celebrities, including Susan Sarandon, Katy Perry, Kid Rock, Ice-T, Stevie Nicks and Willie Nelson.

"John [Mellencamp] talked about us on the stage, and said that [homelessness] really does matter," Leslie said. "As far as the other celebrities, they keep hearing about it. People all over the country are supporting it because we do it well, and we do it fast."

Leslie originally started Veterans Matter because he saw a local problem that left some veterans with nowhere to live. He quickly discovered the problem in Toledo was a national problem, and chapters have since started all over America.

"It's so simple," Leslie said. "It's like everything else in life: If you're doing something good, people want to help. Dine 419 is a perfect example of this, because everybody knows exactly what the money does."

There are over 57,000 homeless veterans, many of whom qualify for voucher-assisted living provided by the U.S. government. However, they often lack the initial rental deposits necessary to secure their housing. That's where Veterans Matters steps in to raise money and work directly with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure funds go straight to landlords for the vets in need.

Veterans Matter connects local communities, foundations, corporations and veterans groups with HUD and VA to move homeless vets off the streets and into permanent, supported housing. Once housed, services are lined up to help veterans and their families return to domestic autonomy.

"We only raise enough to house the vets in any given area of operation, then we cease funding and move on to the next operation," Leslie said.

For more information, visit www.dine419.org.

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