



**NEW ORLEANS
LOUISIANA CHAPTER**



PADDLE. FISH. HEAL.

A Continuing Coverage Series • Story & Photos by Donna Bush

Continuing our series on non-profits, I introduce you to Heroes on the Water (HOW) New Orleans Chapter. I first learned about HOW when I met Jason Austin, a veteran with HOW, years ago. This organization is near and dear to my heart because my husband, Eric, served in Vietnam. Sadly, Vietnam veterans did not receive the appreciation that most of our service personnel do today.

HOW is a nationally based 501(c)3 non-profit founded in 2007 by Jim Dolan. Dolan had a 13-year career with the U.S. Air Force, followed by several years as an American Airlines pilot. With a passion for fishing, he learned to kayak in 2005, which led him to the realization that physically and psychologically affected veterans could benefit from time on the water, allowing them to heal by recapturing their freedom. With that idea in mind,

he founded HOW. Today there are 56 chapters in 26 states. Nationwide, approximately 6000 veterans and first responders are served by over 5000 volunteers giving of their time. Sadly, Jim passed away in 2019. He will be greatly missed by many that he has selflessly shared his love and passion with. The HOW website is full of countless stories of his kindness.

The New Orleans chapter was founded in March 2015 by retired Army 1SG (First Sergeant), Paul Tullier. Paul retired in 2012 after 26 years of service that included several tours of duty during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was ready to take a break. After leaving service, his 1st Platoon Sergeant who always gave the suicide briefings, committed suicide. In Paul's words, "That was an asskicker. I wanted to give back. I had successfully navigated the waters of a military career and multiple deployments.

I wanted to help veterans and felt that a non-profit would be a good fit. I had heard Jason Austin's story and was so moved by it. I met Jim Dolan in Grand Isle in 2014 and discussed his vision for HOW. I really wanted to volunteer but there was no chapter available. So, like a good 1SG, I decided if there's not one here, we are going to make one." He formed a leadership team that included Jeff and Jessie Saucier (current chapter coordinator). Their mission was to assemble and produce good events that benefit Veterans, First Responders and their families with an objective "to get Veterans and First Responders out, off the couch, and to engage with each other."

Per Paul, "HOW members are all part of the same tribe. When you meet back with your tribe, you can talk about things that you can't really talk about with others because we understand each other - the lingo."

Heroes on the Water chapters are mostly run by volunteers who organize the events, transport kayaks and fishing gear to the event locations, load and unload kayaks and gear, assist participants with entering and exiting boats, remove fish from hooks and provide lunch. All of this is free to veterans, first responders and their families!

Events are held from March - November in the New Orleans/Northshore area. Events can be at a public launch such as Heritage Park, a semi-private launch such as the Slidell Elks Lodge on Bayou Liberty or at private waterfront homes of sponsors. Participants are encouraged to do what they enjoy. They can paddle around the bayou, they can fish, or they can simply enjoy some camaraderie with like-minded individuals. All are welcome. All are loved. All are supported.

Participants do not need to be accomplished paddlers or fisherpersons;

lessons are provided as needed. All events kick off with a safety briefing.

In 2019, HOW-NO put 140 veterans, first responders and family on the water. Sixty-one volunteers helped make this possible.

I met veterans, their families, first responders and volunteers on a hot summer August day at Heritage Park. Volunteers showed up about an hour early to unload kayaks and life jackets and set up fishing gear. Let me tell you, those are not light kayaks and these folks hustled in the heat! I quickly learned some volunteers are veterans themselves, or even still active duty. Several were associated with Bayou Coast Kayak Fishing Club volunteering as fishing guides. For the vets and first responders not comfortable in a kayak, outriggers were added to provide additional stability. One kayak even had a battery powered motor with hand controls! They thought of everything.

I met Mary Mayo, an amazing woman. You may remember her story from June of 2007. Mary and her fiancé, Beau Raimer, were both St. Tammany Parish Sheriff officers. They were enroute to EJ Fielding Funeral Home for the funeral of a fellow officer, Hilery Mayo (no relationship, except by badge), who had been killed in the line of duty. A thunderstorm spun up, ripping off a 60-foot pine tree alongside the road, felling it across the back of their cruiser. The freak accident killed her fiancé instantly and left Mary a paraplegic, with 3 breaks in her neck, 2 breaks in her back, 3 broken ribs and a broken scapula. Over the course of her treatment, she suffered from acute respiratory distress syndrome, pneumonia, and sepsis. Two weeks after the accident, she died for over 4 minutes, during which she saw her fiancé in the afterlife. Four months after the accident, she returned to the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office as a

How can you help Heroes on the Water?

Volunteer. Donate. Make a difference in someone's life.

- ▶ Host an event if you have waterfront property
- ▶ Provide lunch for an event
- ▶ Become an event day volunteer or guide
- ▶ Join the leadership team (you will be mentored)
- ▶ Assist with community outreach at a booth or tradeshow. Help spread the word with community organizations
- ▶ Local businesses can partner with HOW-NO to receive a portion of sales for any particular item
- ▶ Donate at HeroesOnTheWater.org and mention the New Orleans Chapter in your comments

Expense examples:

- ▶ Rod/reel - \$100
- ▶ Kayak - \$1000
- ▶ Sponsor an event covering food, drinks and bait - \$250
- ▶ Annual equipment maintenance & replacement - \$1000
- ▶ Annual storage fees for the trailers - \$5000

Would you like to join a Heroes on the Water event?

- ▶ Email Jessie at NewOrleans.LA@HeroesOnTheWater.org or send a FB message to Heroes on the Water New Orleans Louisiana Chapter and you will be added to the Eventbrite invite list.
- ▶ Events are posted on their FB page a month prior to the event.

All chapter events are posted on HeroesOnTheWater.org and are open to all regardless of where you live.

- ▶ Sign up for the second annual Livin' the Dream Jim Dolan Memorial Fishing Tournament at heroesonthewater.org. The virtual event will run from September 11th to October 10th.



dispatcher; but she later developed a blood clot in her leg, forcing her into disability retirement.

Mary arrived with her service dog, Willa, for her first water outing since her accident. She has always been passionate about fishing and was looking forward to being back on the water. She had hoped to bring Willa with her in the kayak, but Willa wasn't keen on that idea. She stayed behind, enjoying walks and pets with volunteers. Mary paddled to a shady spot on the bayou and soon had a fishing pole in hand, ready to go. Her cousin, Todd, and his wife, Trish, along with veteran volunteer, Justin Lang, paddled alongside Mary, assisting as needed. In just a short time, Mary had hooked her first fish, a bream, which might have been the largest catch of the day. When I spoke with Mary about the trip, she exclaimed, "I had a blast! This was my first trip, but it definitely is not my last." When I asked Mary what HOW meant to her, she quickly responded, "I'm so glad they became part of my life and included me with the veterans. I wasn't sure at first about attending since I'm not a Vet, but they insisted. It is so good to get back on the water."

One of the biggest surprises of the day was the arrival of Barry Guidry, a retired Army Major from Lafayette. He didn't come to paddle, fish or eat lunch - he just happened to be nearby. He stayed only 20 minutes, but as Paul Tullier said, "It was truly a God-wink!" Divine intervention brought these two together. Their stories are similar in many ways. Let me share Barry's story with you:

After 26 ½ years in military infantry and special operations, coming home from each tour unscathed, Barry made the decision to retire. He signed his retirement paperwork on a Friday afternoon, with a month and a half of leave before the military would release him. On his first day of vacation, he went canoeing down Whiskey Chitto River, stopping for lunch and a couple of beers at a sandbar with a rope swing. He grabbed the rope to swing and, not realizing that it was muddy and wet, he slipped, went upside down in 3 foot of water and shattered his C6 vertebra, leaving him instantly paralyzed.

Mary and Barry instantly connected. Mary has been struggling with finding a vehicle that would give her more independence. With Barry's connections, he plans to help Mary with this. Barry shared with me, "The greatest gift that God has given us is doing things for others, never expecting anything in return."

Remember the motorized kayak? Barry assisted with the design layout and field-tested it at a water survival school to verify it would provide adequate safety for wheelchair-bound paddlers. He was flipped numerous times to prove its viability.

Paul recently stepped down from the leadership team, leaving the organization in the capable hands of Jeff, Jessie, Jason Kahl (a veteran) and his wife Dawn. Paul

shared, "I've found that I am now a recipient instead of a provider. I get the same thing that all of the people that show up to paddle get out of it - the benefit of sharing something with a brother [or sister] and hanging out with somebody that knows where I've been. They look at me and they understand. If I need to pick up the phone and call someone, I can."

Jason Kahl, an Army veteran of Desert Storm, used his crutch for assistance into his kayak. Once in, he tossed it to the bank. "Any time away from crutches is a good time." As I photographed Jason pedaling his kayak, he yelled to me, "Watch this!" He grabbed the H-bar on his Jackson Kayak Coosa and pulled himself to a standing position, grinning and proud.

I met Karen Lee, an Army veteran, along with her husband, Darrell. Darrell was certainly at home in a kayak. Karen, on the other hand, was getting in a kayak for only her second time. She confessed that she can't swim and was quite scared getting in and out of the boat. Jason Lang installed outriggers on the kayak to make it more stable for her. She looked so comfortable and happy once she got away from the dock and felt secure. She shared, "Being on the water calms my mind. I stop thinking and worrying about the past. I feel like I'm in a zone. It was so relaxing and comfortable, I wanted to go to sleep, but I was afraid I would roll over," she laughed.

My friend, Jason Austin, joined the Army in 1990 under a delayed entry program and spent the next 19 years as a military policeman. On April 13, 2007, the vehicle he was in ran over a couple of South African 155 rounds and a pile of 80mm mortars. Jason spent the next 900 days recovering from a broken neck, broken back, left frontal brain damage, hearing and vision loss, and some pretty serious head and leg damage. He died 8 times on his way to Germany. He spent a week there stabilizing, then he was transferred to a polytrauma center in Tampa, Florida. He was told he would never walk again, and his brain may or may not heal.

A year later, the physical side had started to heal; but it was the mental side that was the real struggle, particularly trying to remember things. Friends and family didn't recognize him. He didn't even recognize himself. After 19 years in the Army, he no longer had a career. His wife left after about a year, taking their infant daughter with her. He found himself with no career, no family, and no friends. He asked himself, "What do I have?" The answer - "A shotgun. A letter, apologizing. You make that decision; I'm just gonna leave and be done with it. That day came."

Jason shares, "Today, I can still taste the metal from the gun barrel in my mouth and I can see everything going on that day. I'll be damned if the phone didn't ring and interrupt me killing myself." The voice on the other side



Nick Rauber is the founder of Swollfest, a generous supporter of HOW-NO. In 1997, Nick was a junior at Jesuit High School and put together his own fishing rodeo with some friends. Through discussions with friends

while working out at Jesuit (getting “swoll”) they came up with the name Swollfest for the swollest (largest) fish. That first year there were 3 Dads, their sons and couple of friends. Each Mom cooked a meal for one night. This year, they hosted their 23rd annual tournament, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for different charities.

Nick had been searching for an organization to partner with to support veterans. “Choosing HOW was easy because they are such a great organization and their mission aligns with ours. It’s amazing what they do and how dedicated they stay to our veterans. To this day, their organization has exceeded all of our expectations and have been amazing to work with. For our 20th annual, we had a big trailer made to hold 16 kayaks for HOW. Many members of their organization attended and as we announced our donation to them, a truck pulled up with the trailer and kayaks. Cheering applause erupted! It was one of the proudest moments of Swollfest! Those moments make all the hard work of putting on the tournament worth it.”

Swollfest has grown over the years into its own 501(c)3 that supports many different charities. Swollfest Outdoor Wish takes differently-abled children and veterans on a once-in-a-lifetime outdoor trip. They have given away numerous Action Track Chairs, an all-terrain wheelchair, to wheelchair-bound children. They help the local community by giving to the Grand Isle School. This year they fulfilled their pledge of \$500,000 to Our Lady of the Lake Children’s Hospital in Baton Rouge. In honor of the tournament, the first floor cafe is named the Swollfest Café!



of the phone said, “Hey! I don’t know what you’re doing tomorrow, but you wanna go fishing?”

“Something told me to go. I thought, ‘You can kill yourself tomorrow if it doesn’t work out.’” Jason went and spent about 4 hours on the water in Sarasota Florida with a guy he didn’t know. He didn’t catch a single fish. “But my life changed forever. That guy was a representative of Heroes on the Water. I went home and thought about the day. My girlfriend came home from work and said, ‘Hey! You’re in a good mood.’ ‘Yeah, I went fishing today with some guy I didn’t know, and I didn’t kill myself.’ From that day, I never looked back. I sold the shotgun and put that money towards a kayak and some fishing gear.”

Jason went on to become a volunteer with Heroes on the Water, New Orleans Chapter Coordinator, National Spokesperson for Heroes on the Water, and he now serves as a full-time Area Coordinator at the National Staff level managing 31 chapters across the U.S.

As I did my interviews for this story, I noticed that every veteran or first responder I called answered their phone. None of the calls went to voicemail, like most of us do when we don’t recognize the number. I wasn’t in their contacts, but they all still answered. Why? Because, you never know if that call is a fellow brother or sister in arms needing a friend, an ear or some support.

The one constant, consistent thought from everyone that I spoke with is that Heroes on the Water has helped change their lives for the better. The organization has given them an outlet on the water; camaraderie with people who understand how they feel and what they’ve been through; an opportunity to feel a sense of normalcy; a second chance; a fresh perspective, a new outlook; something to look forward to; some serenity and some peace.

