

NINA MOINI: The 4th of July will be special at one of Minnesota's campgrounds this weekend. Veterans Campground in Washington County is marking 100 years of serving veterans as a place for rest, relaxation, and belonging. Joining me now is the campgrounds manager, Ken Larson. He's a Minnesota National Guard veteran. Thank you very much for your service, Ken, and for being with us this afternoon.

KEN LARSON: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: 100 years is such a wonderful accomplishment. Would you tell us, to begin with, about some of the history of the veterans campgrounds there and why it originally came to be?

KEN LARSON: Back in 1926, it used to be a staples of states up here. They wanted to help veterans back in the days there to help the veterans get over shell shock, that we know today as PTSD. So the farmer donated the land to us. We got about 75 acres here now. And they donated land.

We had the first original hospital in Minneapolis area for veterans was landed right in here, began back in the 1930s to help our veterans that come in and do some relaxation and rest and everything. They housed them. We had a big farmhouse, a big World War II dormitory type building off of a wing on that. And the downstairs of that room was primarily for your food, kitchen area. Yes, there was a bar in there back in the day too.

And the upstairs level was single beds up there for the veterans where they could come up and spend a night or a weekend or a week long vacation up here or a little R&R to get integrated back into the civilian life, try to help the vets out as much as we could possibly do. So it's donated to Disabled American Veterans of Ramsey County.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. And that mission has remained, but it's grown so much. And I know you've been going for 48 years. I mean, basically, half the time. Give us a sense for the campground now and in the gorgeous lake and how much it's grown. That's very exciting.

KEN LARSON: Yes, it's been very exciting. From my Korean vets and starting to come up and then all of a sudden, I had the big influence of Vietnam veterans. And some of these guys didn't even know about us up in there. We're like a diamond in the rough up here, really.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

KEN LARSON: The best well-kept secret. And sometimes we only did about 3,000 visitors. But my Vietnam veterans helped me grew this camp for the last 18 years to get it all modernized and everything up to par. So right now, with the help of the board of directors, I have 14 board of directors. I resigned off of that and came in to the managerial part of it for 18 years now. Help them to get the focus in the right direction. What are we trying to do here?

So being that we were at Disabled Veterans Rest Camp, the word disabled to a regular veteran, they didn't think they belonged here because they weren't that disabled. So we keep our mother name Disabled Veterans Rest Camp Association Inc, doing business as Veterans Campground. So that started attracting all of our younger veterans coming into the camp now.

NINA MOINI: And then fast forward to-- fast forward to last year, you had a record of 76,000 visitors. So you've opened it up, obviously. That's incredible. I wish we had more time. We only have a couple minutes left together. But I wanted to-- wondered if you would share with us why this is so critical for the last 100 years and the next 100 years. Sometimes it's really hard to get people to think that it's OK to relax and it's OK to open up or not open up if they want. What is the critical heart of this service that's being provided here?

KEN LARSON: I would say the most important one is commodity. The veterans are a different [INAUDIBLE]. They don't like to talk about their war stories or anything. But when they come into this camp, they know that they're in a safe haven right here and they can talk to other veterans about their problems, PTSD and everything. We all try to help each other out right here to get past our moments, to get it right, make sure the families are strong and keep on moving forward. That's a crucial thing.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And can people still get involved? Is it booked up for the summer? Or how can people visit?

KEN LARSON: Yes, we are booked up pretty much every summer here. But we take our reservations year round, and you can always visit our website. We're trying to do some upgrading on that right now too. But you can go on our website, which is at www.vetscampmn.org, like Minnesota, dot org.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, I know you have tons of activities too in the wintertime, tons of activities that folks can do with their families. So yeah, we encourage people to check it out and try to get out there. Ken, thanks so much for taking the time today and wishing you a really lovely weekend ahead. Thanks so much.

KEN LARSON: Yeah, thank you now.

NINA MOINI: Ken Larson is the manager of Veterans Campground, which is in Washington County. Our thanks to Ken for his time.