



RIVERSIDE STORIES

GARY RIDEOUT

Founder of Vetraplex in Cottonwood, AZ

AFTER GARY RIDEOUT'S tour of duty ended with the resolution of the Gulf War, he found work as a door-to-door insurance salesman in Chicago, Illinois; this hard work enabled him to provide for his family. While Gary was fortunate to find work, many veterans were met with insurmountable difficulties in trying to blend into the workforce; many found themselves without work and home. In fact, according to national averages, about 20% of veterans are currently unemployed, and around 23% of America's homeless population are veterans. Gary has brought new light to these unfortunate circumstances, founding Vetraplex in 2011 to serve as a platform for veterans to find work.

“Vets For Hire”

After 16 years of work in the insurance industry, Gary decided to pursue more purposeful work and focused his efforts on the development of an affordable housing program for veterans, a project he was passionate about. Although this project was ultimately unsuccessful, he fostered lasting relationships with many local veterans in the Arizona area, so when the Friends of Verde River Greenway president Chip Norton suggested they work together to support local organizations in repairing the riversides of the Verde Valley, Vetraplex came into its own.

Today, veterans employed by Gary work closely with other local organizations, like the Friends of Verde River Greenway, Arizona Conservation Corps, Apache Nation, and others to help remove invasive plant species from the Verde River Valley, and restore the river systems to their original value. These veterans are instrumental in the restoration process, operating chainsaws, spraying herbicide, and even rebuilding habitats for native wildlife.

“This season, we’re doing a lot of retreatments of invasive plants, taking out the four main invasive species that take over these riparian (riverside) areas: tamarisk (saltcedar), arundo, Russian olive, and tree of heaven. Our guys work four ten-hour days a week, for a 22-week season,” Gary states. The work is certainly grueling, but it has attracted a considerable amount of veterans looking for work, as Vetraplex has grown every year since its founding only five years ago.

“The veterans that we’ve hired, some of them have been homeless. Some of them were part of service organizations where they were in a two-year program for drugs or alcohol,” Gary states. “We’ve done a lot

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This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with the Verde Watershed Restoration Coalition, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

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Photography Credit: Zach Mahone

of good with helping veterans get off the street. Now they’re gainfully employed. Some guys we’ve helped with getting their driver’s licenses, some we’ve helped with vehicles, and some we’ve even helped to find housing.”

Even though his business has found some formidable success, Gary is still faced with the stress of uncertainty on a yearly basis. As his crews only work on the Verde River for 22 weeks a year, for the remainder of the year when river restoration work halts, he tries to find work for his veterans. “Imagine having six full time employees working on the river for 22 weeks, and then for 22 weeks that ends. I have individuals who still need to work, and still want to work,” he states. “Knock on wood, we’ve been able to find them work for the past five consecutive years.”

Since his first season in September of 2011, Gary has now franchised Vetraplex, creating offices across Arizona in Prescott Valley, Phoenix, Chandler, and a main office in Cottonwood. Driven to move the company even further, he states, “I’m passionate about what I’ve started, and what I need to do. I would like to see vets for hire in every state in the country. I think we have a great opportunity for veterans who want to own their own businesses



and build lives for themselves.”

Gary’s veterans are dedicated, too, and most of them have stayed with the program for some years now. Gary attributes this to the value and sense of satisfaction in the work that riparian restoration requires, and the visible success that has come their way. “It’s

unbelievable the amount of acreage we’ve treated on private and public lands,” he states. “If you’re out there, you can absolutely see the difference that our crews and the other crews are making in the river restoration efforts.” ■