



Rich Segarra, left, and Michael Barnes on the Pea Hill Boat Ramp

Lake Gaston has not only become a home or a retreat for many, but a place veterans can find peace and therapy through fishing.

That's where Operation Vets with Nets comes in, with the founder and president of the nonprofit organization Rich Segarra beginning the initiative in 2021.

According to the organization's website, the goal is to allow active duty, retired service members and veterans with disabilities to catch catfish and some stripers on the lake.

Launching his pontoon boat from the Pea Hill Boat Ramp one early Sunday morning, Segarra brought his long-time friend of 20 years, Navy veteran Randall Gibson, out on the lake to partake in what the organization does. Getting the boat on its way, Segarra began dropping lines with four fishing poles on the rear trailing behind to catch some catfish, which he said he usually has six poles out. From there, it was smooth "sailing" with the trolling motor, some

music and camaraderie with fellow vets.

When asked how he came up with the idea, Segarra said it all started when he began fishing from the dock and realized he had a boat he could take out on the water instead. He then went to buy some cheap fishing rod holders and other equipment. Segarra said he was not catching any catfish at first until he received pointers from Zakk Royce, a well-known fishing expert in the area, through a community social media page.

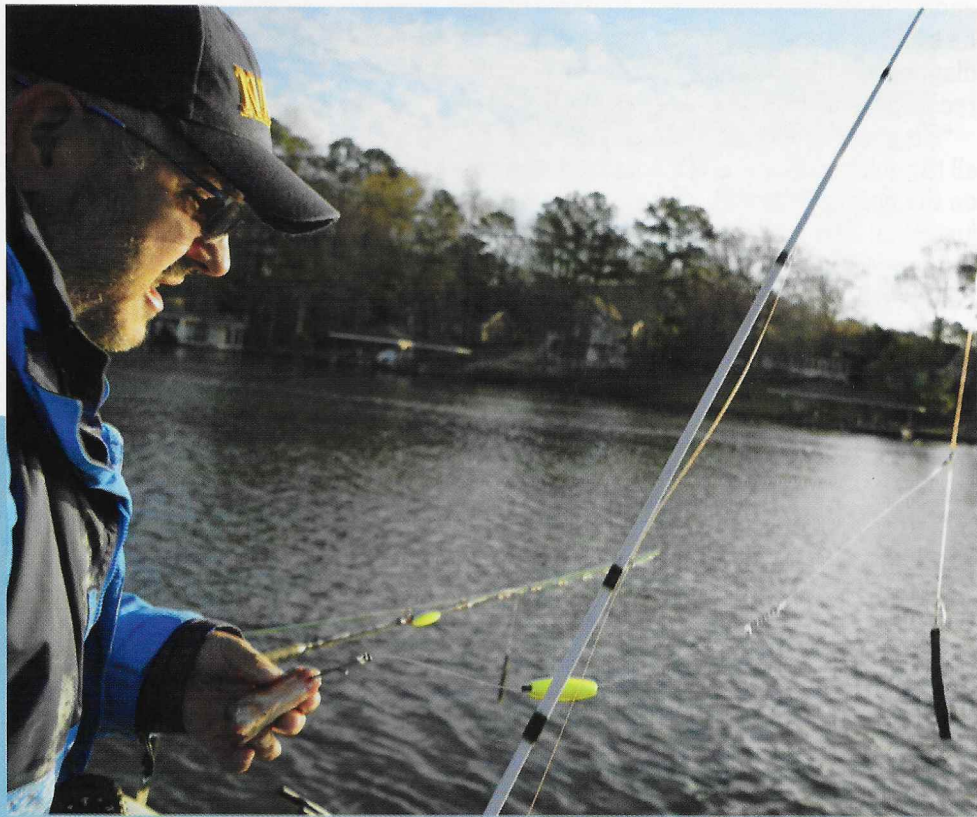
"I was telling him I'm out seven — eight hours, and I'm not catching anything," he said. "I get the boat up to point five miles an hour, shut it off, drift a little bit, kept doing that."

Segarra said Royce suggested investing in a trolling motor and eventually, he did. Now outfitted with what it takes to get the job done, he said spots on the lake where he spent three months catching nothing but frustration ended up hooking the catfish. Now for a year and a

Peaceful warriors

on the lake

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Rich Segarra



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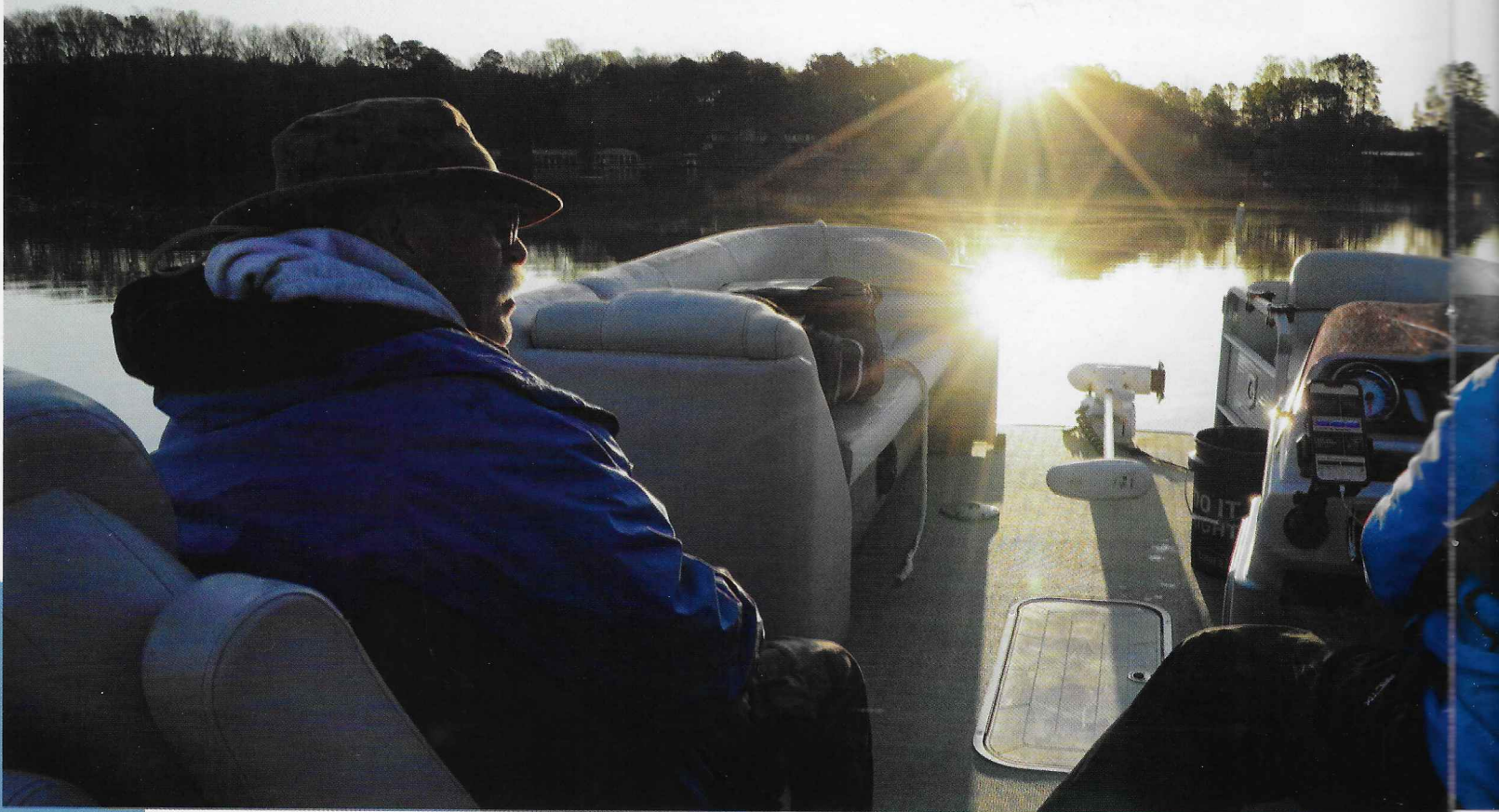
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from fishing is in a way, therapeutic for him since he also battles with depression due to his back and degenerative disc disease.

“A lot of times, my grandkids want to play and want to jump on grandpa,” he said. “And I almost fell down the stairs carrying my granddaughter. And so for me, I was starting to get depressed because I couldn’t play with my grandkids. And so when I started taking guys out and hearing back from them on how it’s affected them, and the benefits it had on them that automatically — it ended up becoming very therapeutic. I had a buddy of mine’s wife call me, and she said, ‘Rich, you got to take him back out fishing again. He drives me crazy.’ Yeah, my wife kind of says the same thing at times. And so it really becomes therapeutic as well. Seeing the benefits it’s having on other people.”

Segarra said last year he was able to take 16 veterans out on the lake that were not associated with the organization itself due to the idea being freshly new. But for their first mission with the organization on March 14, he did take out Sgt. 1st Class Craig Norton with the North Carolina National Guard and his son, Eli. Segarra said Norton wanted to start building memories with his son, who has autism. He said the day was cold and windy, but the crew weathered through it. Segarra said he let Eli wear his motorcycle helmet to block the cold wind but could see the boy’s

smile as he reeled in a 10-pound fish.

“The more and more that I see the excitement, the relaxation, the more and more I just love doing what I’m doing,” he said.

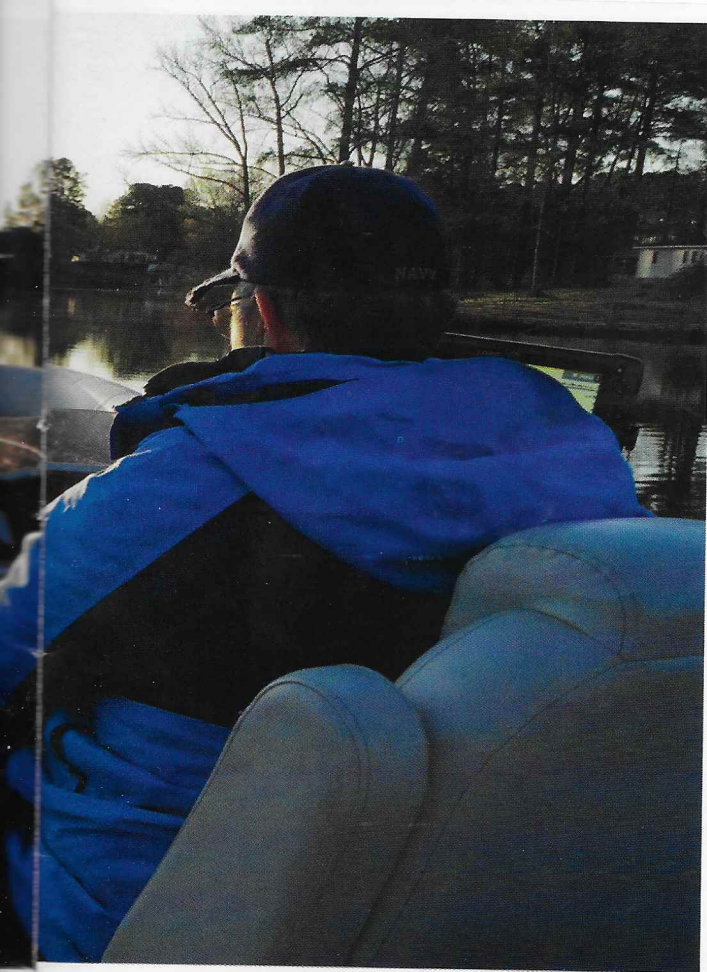
Segarra said if it were up to him, he would be out every weekend on the boat taking people out.

“But my wife would not be happy with that because I have stuff to do at home too,” he said, chuckling.

Segarra said there are people locally who volunteer to take folks out on the lake as well.

Meeting up with Segarra later that Sunday was Michael Barnes out of Wake Forest, dropping his pontoon boat into the lake. Barnes said he is looking to volunteer his time with the organization and became interested in helping after seeing videos and its website.

“I’m always looking to do something to volunteer,” he said. “So, I figured this would be a good opportunity. Since I have a boat and enjoy to fish I can help out the organization. I was never in the military. So I thought this is some way that I could help give back to those who have given so much to us in the country. So that’s really what drew it to me. I was a volunteer firefighter in New York. So I’ve always wanted to do stuff to help the community when I’m not doing my normal job, and I figured this is great. There are a lot of veterans in this area because of the military bases around. I figured it’s a way for me to give back to



someone that's given so much to us."

Also joining in to support is Operation Vets with Nets' first sponsor — Mad Katz Gear LLC out of Rockingham.

Owner Matt Knight of Mad Katz said Segarra reached out to him and told him about Operation Vets with Nets.

"I think he's got a great thing going on where we can actually feel, see and touch individuals," Knight said. "So I wanted to jump on board, make sure that he had all the supplies and gear they get these guys out there and have a good successful time."

Segarra said for every mission Operation Vets with Nets goes on, Knight will send his guests a cap and T-shirt.

In addition, Knight said if the organization buys a rod, it will receive another, or if it buys five it will receive an additional five rods.

With donations coming into the organization, Segarra said he is able to buy extra lines and other items for the missions, but there was one large monetary donation of \$2,000 to the organization. He said the person wanted to remain anonymous, but came to his house with the check after hearing that the organization was trying to raise funds for more equipment.

"He says, 'Listen, he says, I want to give you something here towards the new rod and reels that you're trying to raise funds for,'" Segarra said. "And so we started talking. I go inside the house, sit down for a minute, open up the envelope, and see it was a check

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half, Segarra said that is all he has been doing and began realizing how relaxing it all was.

"I'll come out here in the morning trying to load up and my back's killing me," he said. "But once there's action going on, I don't even think about the pain in my back until like later on that night when I'm sitting home. But I'll be up the next morning doing it again."

But it was not until a fellow friend of his wanted to join him out on the lake that he realized how much it helps to de-stress.

Segarra said he invited his friend out one day and ended up catching some fish. A couple of days later, he said his friend called him and told him he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and receiving care from the Veterans Affairs.

"He goes, 'And dude, the last couple of days is like all the stress was gone. It's because I was able to get on the boat, go out with a brother, just fish, relax, and just let all life's worries disappear,'" Segarra recalled the conversation. "He almost had me in tears because I didn't realize how much of an effect it actually had on him."

It was then Segarra said he began doing research on the therapeutic benefits of outdoor activities. He said he went to his own VA therapist and told her about his experience with fishing and his veteran friend.

"She said to keep it up and take those vets out," Segarra said.

And that was where the idea for Operation Vets with Nets was born.

Gibson, who was along on his first ride, said he served 20 years in the Navy submarine service and being back out on a peaceful lake reminded him of where he grew up at in Southeast Louisiana.

"This is almost like being back home," he said. "It is just quiet, peaceful, nice, serene."

Gibson said he works for an intermodal trucking company and was invited out to the lake by Segarra for some relaxation.

"That's kind of nuts," he said about the trucking industry's current state. "Especially after the pandemic and everything else. It's a hard time. Fuel prices are going crazy. Drivers are getting frustrated. We're losing drivers. I mean, it's a nationwide problem. Like I just told him today, I haven't thought about a truck for a couple of hours."

When asked if he believes the organization's goal will help many veterans, Gibson said he absolutely believed it will because many of the issues veterans deal with stem from stimulation.

"Everybody reacts to certain stimulations differently," he said. "And that's peace and quiet."

For Segarra, the sight of seeing veterans benefit



Randall Gibson



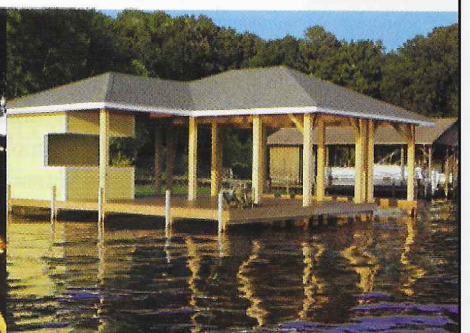
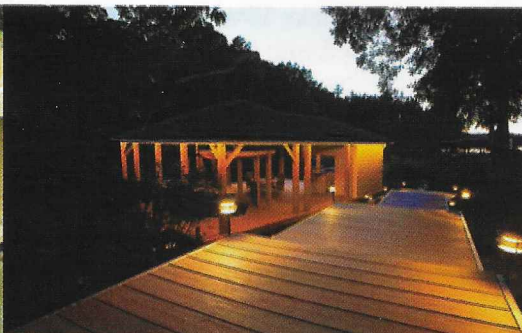
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for \$2,000 when I was in the process of trying to raise \$2,500. All that broke me down. I called my wife — I was virtually in tears, that someone would do that. And it just moves my heart because even in tough times, people still can find it in their hearts to do something like that. And it really meant a lot.”

Segarra said the individual believes in what Operation Vets with Nets is doing for the veteran community on Lake Gaston.

“He believes that we need to take care of our vets,” he said.

Segarra mentioned possibly having recurring funds of \$10 a month going toward the organization and gave an example that if 200 people were to donate \$10 a month, it would generate \$2,000 monthly. He said that amount would help keep up with supplies, pay for gas, and put money aside to get a boat that could expand the opportunities for other veterans, such as those in wheelchairs. Segarra said a Monster Cat boat costs about \$90,000, but could be modified to allow wheelchair access for veterans.

At the end of the day, Operation Vets with Nets is a worthy cause for veterans who need that peace on Lake Gaston.

For more information on Operation Vets with Nets, visit operationvetswithnets.org or follow them on Facebook.

