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VETERAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR MOVES ON, LEAVES ‘LIFESAVING’ LEGACY

Uniontown, PA – When Veteran Affairs Director Brian Bensen assumed his role, he couldn’t imagine the lasting impact he’d have on Fayette County – or vice versa.

“When I came here to finish my time on active duty, I don’t think I even knew where the courthouse was. I just lived here and drove to Pittsburgh every day to serve. After these last five years, I can say that I actually feel like I’m from here. This place made me feel like I’m home,” Bensen said. “I spent a lot of time working alongside some great people and, more importantly, I got to serve the veterans here. That alone makes me want to stay here for the rest of my life. Five years ago, I knew no one. Now, I can’t stop at Sheetz for a coffee without seeing a veteran; or their family members; or someone else I know. They’re people I get to help; lives I get to touch; and they make me feel like I belong here. I feel like this county has done more for me than I did for it.”

November 8 marked Bensen’s final day with Fayette County. He will soon begin working as a veterans’ service officer with the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veteran Affairs.

“I’ll continue to assist veterans with benefits and oversee local counties when it comes to training and day-to-day operations. I’m just getting a larger platform to affect change beyond Fayette County,” Bensen said. “I’ll be taking some of the experiences I’ve had and what I’ve learned in the last five years and teaching others how to better serve our veterans. If there’s anything I can do to help them give hope to people who’ve served, then it’s all worth it.”

Born and raised near Philadelphia, Bensen joined the county’s ranks in August 2019, after relocating to Bullskin Township and retiring from 23 years of active-duty military service. He spent his tenure using the skills and knowledge he gained as a United States Marine Corps Master Sergeant in his approach to helping local veterans.

While Bensen said the position was “handed to (him) in good condition,” he quickly realized there was a widespread need for improved access to mental and physical health care.

“When these veterans started confiding in us about their mental health, I didn’t feel right just filing a claim and hoping they were still around in six months to collect their benefits,” he said.

Bensen formed a strong partnership with Veteran Affairs Community-Based Outpatient RN Clinic Manager Jessica Friend, which became an integral part of his service and “one of (his) strongest and greatest lifelines.”

“Our relationship allowed me to take a veteran who was sitting in my office in pain, put them in my truck, take them directly to the clinic and hand them over for immediate care,” he said. “Jessica and her team saw my veterans on the spot and would not let me lose sleep at night worrying about them. If a

veteran asked her office about benefits, she'd send them right over to me, so we were able to mutually support each other while making sure our veterans are getting all their needs met at once."

In addition to expanding veterans' health care connections, Bensen founded the Fayette County Suicide Prevention Task Force, on which he will continue to serve. The task force has led to a countywide approach to tackling mental health issues and creation of veteran events aimed at building community and combating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"I just want to do whatever we can to make a difference. Long after I'm gone, the office will still file claims, take care of burials and our elderly veterans. That's what they do," Bensen said. "I wanted to create a space where, the moment they walk through my door, they know they're going to be loved and respected. If there was something I couldn't do for them, I was able to hand-deliver them to the people that could help them. Their problems are my problems, and I'd do anything to get them that help."

Bensen has served as the master of ceremonies at countless county events and parades, overseen the placement of thousands of flags and markers on veteran graves, partnered with community organizations to offer expos, breakfasts, veteran date nights and appreciation picnics. He also regularly refuses the spotlight, insisting that others be featured in media coverage before himself.

Friend shared her mutual admiration for Bensen and said his humble approach to serving Fayette County is "just who he is."

"What a wonderful leader, strong veteran, wonderful father and 'pappy,' and the best friend. I will absolutely miss his late night texts about the patients he can't stop thinking about and his office visits on the way back from the gym when we would talk things out for a veteran," Friend said, tearfully. "We've been a powerhouse together, and he's my other half that I'm going to miss. There are so many things that I'm proud of, but if I had to pick one thing, it's Brian bringing me patients that typically would not utilize the VA. He's helped me with everything – from claims to behavioral health emergencies after hours; making house calls to my patients; driving veterans to the main VA in Pittsburgh because they don't have a ride. I could go on and on about him."

Friend said Bensen once made a late-night house call to a dying veteran and consulted her via phone for medical advice while volunteering his time with the grieving family. For another veteran, Bensen helped restore electricity and water service to his home and ensured he had heat and food to survive.

"These are the things no one knows that he does; the things he would never claim credit for. Nobody knows all the things he and I have accomplished together," she said. "And the way that he treats my staff – I just couldn't ask for a better partner in crime. I'll miss you, Brian. I know there is something greater, and you will do great things. Always."

Bensen said he spent his career and most of his personal life surrounding himself with "great people that have always made (him) look good," including his staff members; Jackie Fowler, Glenn Siple, Clark Bowman and Perry Russell.

"It's important to have good people around you. That's the true definition of my marriage, and it was no different here in my approach to serving Fayette County," Bensen said. "Jackie, Glenn, Clark and Perry – I was so blessed to have them. I got a lot of credit here for things that I did, but they're the ones who really deserve all the credit. Without their loyalty, hard work and dedication, none of this would be possible. They allowed me to lead them and trusted me. This was one of the hardest decisions I've ever had to make. I truly love them and the people that I got to serve."

Fowler tearfully said she refused to say “goodbye” to Bensen and is “still in denial” about his departure.

“I will miss him so very much. The impact he has made in my life cannot be put into words, other than ‘life-changing or lifesaving.’ This extends to all aspects of my life, not just work. For me personally, Brian restored my faith in humanity. Good people do exist,” Fowler said. “He gave me a whole new outlook on how work should be. Who knew that honesty, trust, loyalty and compassion are things that are achievable in a workplace environment?”

Fowler said many people can learn from Bensen’s example of “how effective leadership can change everything.”

“He leads not just with words; he leads by example and, most of all, with his whole heart. He has trained me to do this job, and I will continue to try to make him proud and do the very best job I can,” Fowler said. “I know he will do great things no matter where he goes. We are losing a great asset here in this office, but his job serving the veteran community is not done. I wish him the absolute best life has to offer. Semper Fi, marine. HOORAH, boss baby! Go get ‘em!”

Fayette County Commissioner Chairman Scott Dunn is “really sorry to see Brian leave.”

“He has improved our Veteran’s Affairs office tremendously to the point that Fayette is 5th in Pennsylvania in veteran benefit submissions. But that isn’t the only reason Brian will be missed,” said Dunn. “He wears his heart on his sleeve. I’ve seen him run out of the office to assist a veteran in distress. He has represented Fayette County well and I wish him all the best in his new endeavor.”

Commissioner Vince Vicites said Bensen “did a wonderful job for Fayette County and its veterans.”

“He helped a lot of veterans get the benefits they needed and raised awareness of veterans’ issues throughout Fayette County,” Vicites said. “He will be missed, and I wish him much success with his new position. I thank Brian for his dedication and service to county government.”

Commissioner Dave Lohr said Bensen is “an example of the very best of Fayette County.”

“We have so many smart, dedicated, compassionate people who work here, and Brian has taken that standard to new heights. Diligent and unfailingly loyal, Brian is the very embodiment of ‘Semper Fi,’ the marine motto,” Lohr said. “Working hand-in-hand with his outstanding office staff, he’s been a blessing to both the veterans and families he’s tasked with helping, and to all our Fayette County managers and staff.”

When asked about his hopes for Bensen’s future endeavors at the state level, Lohr said, “Words fail me.”

“I know that Brian will be a blessing to everyone he encounters at his next duty station, and I pray that he will find peace and fulfillment in his next great adventure,” he said. “Brian, I salute you – and remember to pack your crayons!”

Bensen said his next chapter will also allow him to spend more time with his family, including his wife, Jennifer Bensen; son, Christopher Bensen; daughter, Amber (Will) Johnson; and granddaughters, Kora and Scarlett Johnson.

Visibly emotional, Bensen said he will never forget the many veterans who made his job fulfilling and will continue to do whatever he can to support Fayette County.

“To our veterans – thank you for allowing me into your life. I hope I made an impact, because I know you sure made an impact on me,” he said. “Thank you for the opportunity to serve you. God bless and Semper Fidelis.”

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