



Volunteer Carolyn Logan works on Christmas cards for veterans.

Salisbury's BEST-KEPT SECRET

*Veterans Social Center provides healing, camaraderie
for those who served*

STORY : PETE PRUNKL | PHOTOGRAPHY : SEAN MEYERS



U.S. Air Force veteran Kenny Hardin, right, chats with Marine Claude Hosch.

Every day is Veteran's Day somewhere in Rowan County. For starters, the massive 3,400-employee Bill Hefner Veterans Health Center treats hundreds of veterans from 21 Piedmont counties. Add in two Veteran of Foreign Wars posts, six American Legion posts, the Veterans Treatment Court and the Rowan County Veteran Service Office and veterans here are regularly thanked, honored, helped and remembered.

Four years ago, the Veterans Social Center joined this array of veteran-friendly organizations. What has this non-profit, that was founded by former Salisbury City Councilman Kenny Hardin, added to the mix?

Hardin, who served six years in the United States Air Force, thought that Rowan County needed a place like the barracks or Non-Commissioned Officer Club where veterans could spend time together. All vets, but especially those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, loneliness and depression, need a friend and a hangout. "I think a lot of veterans get out of the military and feel lost. They feel unwelcome back in society, so this helps with that transition," Hardin said.

With help from donors, his son Bricin (BRY-sin) and the Rowan County Board of Commissioners, Hardin opened the center in West End Plaza in April 2022. Rowan County charges the center rent of \$1 per year for five years ending in 2027. Donations pay to keep the lights on and the



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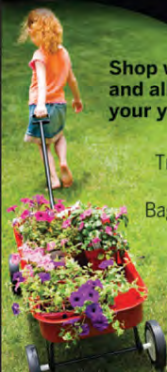


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U.S. Air Force veteran Kenny Hardin received the Elizabeth Duncan Koontz Humanitarian Award in 2025.

water running.

The 2,700-square-foot center with a 40-person capacity fills up for reunions, meetings, monthly bingo games and pool and ping-pong tournaments. Smaller groups of vets and volunteers populate the center for movies, pool and to just shoot the breeze. Some are brought there by family members at a loss as to how to lift clouds of depression from their son or husband. The camaraderie of other vets has worked wonders. The center is open from 1 to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday. There are no membership dues or fees.

Soon after it opened, families of deceased veterans came by with uniforms, scrapbooks, hats, medals, citations, books, helmets, memorabilia and photographs. They asked Hardin to safeguard these treasured, personal items. Those gifts were the beginning of a military museum. Salisbury's M.J. Mee helped grow the museum after finding her late father's Korean War uniform and medals in the family home in Tennessee. Thinking her father's clothing and awards deserved a place better than her closet, M. J. contacted her friend Sandra Kessler-Kidd, a Veterans Social Center volunteer. Sandra said the center would be happy to accept the items. "I had never been there before," said Mee, who visited the center and saw other uniforms decorating the walls. Hardin bought a display case for Jasper W. Mee's uniform and created a fitting memorial for the war veteran. "They did a great job," said M.J.

Sandra Kesler-Kidd became a volunteer in mid-2024 shortly after reaching out to Hardin for help arranging her husband's funeral. Navy Chief Petty Officer Rick Kidd "had friends all over the world who would be coming for the funeral and Kenny arranged for everything," said Sandra. Like Mr. Mee, Chief Kidd has a memorial case at the center. Keller-Kidd had one more request. Her granddaughter Kathryn Murino and Marine Corps Lance Corporal Brandon Curry needed a place for their 2024 wedding. Hardin obtained a preacher and arranged for food and a reception for guests, all at the Veterans Social Center.

Asked for her evaluation of the center, Sandra Kesler-Kidd said, "I think it is wonderful! We do everything to reach out to veterans and give them a place to reminisce. We always have snacks and drinks for them. If someone can't find what they need, Kenny knows so many people, he can reach out and get them pointed in the right direction."

Kessler-Kidd is one of the center's 16 volunteers. These vets, students, teachers and family members of deceased veterans help with paperwork, maintenance, cleanup, equipment repair, calling bingo as well as preparing and serving food. Chief among the volunteers is Carolyn Logan, who handles administrative responsibilities including scheduling volunteers. Logan will handle more of the center's day-to-day operations for the immediate future. Kenny Hardin is stepping back from his central role because of kidney disease. "I'm on the kidney transplant list," he said.

After mentioning his own health issues, Hardin was quick to turn attention to others. One of the center's volunteers, he said, is Tyler Houck, a student at West Rowan High School and a cadet in the school's Junior Reserve Office Training Corps. Houck, who helps with events, plans to join the Army after his 2027 graduation. Hardin taught him how to spit shine his boots in preparation for active duty.

More than 950 individual vets from North Carolina and nine from other states have visited the center since its opening. Two of them, Army veterans Chalmers Branch and James McNear, stopped by for a few



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Army veteran James McNeair, left, shoots pool with Army veteran Chalmers Branch.



Veterans Social Center founder Kenny Hardin taught volunteer Tyler Houck the fine art of shining his boots. Tyler is hoping to join the Army after graduating from West Rowan High School in 2027. (Pete Prunkl photo)



J. W. Mee's uniform, medals, citations and a newspaper article are displayed at The Veterans Social Center. (Pete Prunkl photo)




The wedding photo of Kathryn Murino and Marine Corps Lance Corporal Brandon Curry. The ceremony was held at The Veterans Social Center in 2024. (Submitted photo)



rounds of pool when we visited the center.

Behind the scenes are 138 individuals and businesses that have funded events and furniture, donated gifts-in-kind or offe ed goods and services at a steep discount. Among the center’s Super Stars are Little Cesars Pizza, Woodson Foundation, Penrod Medical Equipment, HTC Sports Apparel, Culvers, Vogue Cleaners, Above the Collar Barbershop, Food Lion, Smoke Pit and Slice’s Diggity Dawgs. Matt Marsh of Th Forum came in for special praise. “If I call Matt and say I have a veteran in need, he has helped with funeral expenses, utility deposits, event sponsorships, televisions, microwaves, gas cards — anything,” said Hardin.

Army veteran Chalmers Branch put down his pool cue and summed up the Veteran Social Center: “I’d come here every day, if I could. I enjoy it.” 

Army veteran and freelance writer Pete Prunkl lives in Salisbury.



Volunteer Pamela Jones straightens up an exhibit at the Social Center.



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