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Veterans honor founder as he leaves Miller's Vets

By MEGAN DOYLE
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SOUTH BEND — The members of the Miller's Vets color guard stood solemnly and saluted former Judge Robert Miller as he walked past them on Thursday night at Evangel Heights United Methodist Church.

Yet when the ceremony ended to honor the judge's retirement, the men and women of Miller's Vets embraced him with teary eyes and heartfelt smiles.

The color guard gathered with Miller's friends and family on Thursday to honor him for his service to the organization on his last day as its commanding officer. The former judge founded Miller's Vets two years ago to provide veterans living at the Center for the Homeless with a renewed pride in their military service.

Miller's Vets member Tracie Swaggers wiped tears from her eyes after she hugged the former judge.

"Judge Miller keeps you on your toes, keeps you thinking about where you're supposed to be," she said. "But without him, there wouldn't be a place for any of us to be."

Miller, 90, decided the time had come for his retirement after two years at the helm of the organization. Today marks the first day of work for the group's new commanding officer, retired naval officer Dan Walsh.

"(Walsh) has a burning desire to help vets," Miller said. "His overall background for this command is clearly superior to my own. I could not be more proud and confident of the future."

Walsh, a 1984 Notre Dame graduate, responded to an e-mail from the Notre Dame Alumni Association to advertise the position within an hour of first reading about the job. His resume includes positions as a flag secretary in Iceland, an assistant professor at Notre Dame, the chair of the ITT-Technical Institute School



Tribune Photo/ROBERT FRANKLIN

Members of Miller's Vets salute Judge Robert Miller as he makes an official military-style exit to mark his retirement during a thank-you party in his honor Thursday inside Evangel Heights Church in South Bend.

of Criminal Justice and a member of a military training program for potential POW soldiers.

"I think what Judge Miller has done here in terms of creating a means to help veterans renew their pride in their service, it gives them hope and understanding," Walsh said.

While Miller's spirit and dedication founded the program, color guard member Kerry Batton said Walsh would also be a strong commander for the group.

"I think this is a really good thing ... there are too many homeless veterans out there," Batton said. "(Walsh) is going to take us to the next level."

As he prepares to succeed Miller and makes plans for the future, Walsh said he will learn from the former judge's tireless drive to improve the program.

"What I can learn from Judge Miller is that I am half his age, and he has twice my energy," Walsh said. "It is amazing to watch him go and see what he's done. His connections have really anchored this program, and I hope he can be my mentor in that regard."

While Miller said he hopes to see local chapters of Miller's Vets expand beyond South Bend, Walsh said he will first focus on strengthening the local

chapter.

"Once we wrap our arms around the local chapter, then we can go to the next level," he said.

Building a relationship between area high schools and the veterans is a goal for Walsh.

"The vets themselves can be somewhat of a mentor to students," he said. "It is important for (students) to understand you can't do it alone. You need someone else's help."

Walsh also spent several years as the director of a Naval Junior ROTC program at an inner-city Chicago high school. While the students faced many disadvantages in their neighborhood, Walsh said the program provided a discipline and a mission for his students.

The lessons he learned in Chicago will be critical to his new position, Walsh said.

"That program provided an outlet to get out of that environment, and that's the same thing Judge Miller is doing with Miller's Vets," Walsh said. "It provides an outlet to get out of homelessness."

As the organization changes command, Miller's Vets staff adjutant and drill instructor Phil Noe said he felt the group would remain true to its mission.

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Miller: 'We need so many people'

"I want to step down," Miller said. "(The Veteran's Center) will be dedicated on 11/11/11. I thought that would be an ideal time if I could have a new commanding officer then ... I want someone ready to fill that desk when it is opened."

The Notre Dame Alumni Association advertised the position for Miller, who graduated from the university in 1942 and then from Notre Dame Law School in 1947.

"We decided to approach Notre Dame because they have so many clubs," Miller said. "There are an awful lot of alumni out there who

attended Notre Dame and served in the military and are active in their alumni club. I think we will have no problem finding good, competent, compassionate leaders to keep this thing rolling."

The founder will continue to be involved as an advisor.

"I've lived way beyond my life expectancy, so I'm keeping my eyes open," Miller said. "This is a young man's game."

Even as Miller searches for his replacement, he hopes to expand Miller's Vets beyond South Bend.

In April, the officers of all Notre Dame Alumni Clubs in Indiana received a video and a written invitation to begin their own chapters of Miller's Vets in their communities.

"All we are going to do is reach out to them," Miller said. "I hope these clubs are going to find these veterans at their shelters and put them in uniform and let them do the colors."

The current Miller's Vets staff at the Center for the Homeless will supervise the expanding program as the Notre Dame Club of St. Joseph Valley helps operate the local chapter, Miller said.

"We need so many people to help with veterans who are down on their luck, who have no money for a funeral," he said. "And we've got a huge number of people who want to help a homeless vet and don't know how to find them."

The original charity will finance all the new chapters until each group can collect its own donations, Miller said. The alumni clubs are not required to contribute any funds to the project.

The Center for the Homeless will continue to be the base for the local chapter of Miller's Vets.

"We're nothing without the center," Miller said. "If we go and find somebody under a bridge, we have no place to house them or feed

them or clean them up ... all I can do is dress them up and give them pride in their uniform again."

Angela Willson, director of initiatives for the Center for the Homeless, described Miller as "tireless."

"He is one of the most passionate people I have ever met; passionate about veterans, passionate about patriotism and passionate about giving," she said. "Nothing slows him down. He is constantly challenging those of us who work with him."

Since the beginning of Miller's Vets in 2009, the program helped veterans at the center reconnect with their military service in a positive way, Willson said.

"Its purpose is to inspire a re-energized sense of purpose in the veterans, to put them back in uniform and have them present the colors at public events," Willson said. "We honor their service."

Many veterans at the center are reluctant to talk

about their service, Willson said, but Miller's Vets can begin a healing process for them.

"Miller's Vets is for those who want to take another look at their service, to build a sense of pride, of patriotism again," he said.

Later this year, the center will further expand its efforts to help homeless veterans when it opens the new Veteran's Center. The facility will house 25 male veterans.

"We will then look to expand our Miller's Vets program and look at our services and programs for our veterans," she said. "Obviously, Miller's Vets will be a part of that."

Willson said Miller has been dedicated to the center.

"Judge Miller is 90 years old," she said. "He has had a long and very, very full life of volunteering. ... He will just continuously give and give and give."

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