

My American Legion

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Trying to vote I found myself at the American Legion my school bus used to drive by daily. I recognized that I had seen this building from a distance for 10 years and thought nothing of it. I had never actually been down this driveway, mainly because it was invite only and I had no reason to be there. While I was voting I stopped a Legion member (easily identified by his American Legion hat). I asked him how I become a member. I don't look like your typical veteran so when he looked at me like I was crazy I quickly told him I served and I just wanted to know how to get involved. Ed gave me his email and invited me to come on the second tuesday of April, meetings are always on the second Tuesday. He was visibly excited and kept thanking me for taking an interest as a young vet.



I knew what to expect with an American Legion; a big open room with wood paneling of some sort, probably a few more American flags than necessary, a bar, a kitchen, and all in all a building that's generally stuck in the past. Post 6 isn't the exception, it's the norm. From the road it's a pond with a small building behind it. As I pulled down the driveway the building grew. I sat and watched men getting out of their cars and shuffling inside. It felt like a movie. I grabbed my 214 and I walked in.

As I walked in the side of the building I found a long hall with wood panel on both sides. There was a man sitting at a table at the end of the hall, it said \$5 on a handwritten note taped onto the side of the table facing me. I'm one of the statistics so if they would have actually needed money I would have quietly retreated. As I slowly made my way down the hall I was joined by two men whos banter reminded me of my piss mate Justin. They talked to each other in a way only best friends who served truly understand.



I took a seat near the entrance table. I was chatting with the Vice Commander(s) while signing up to become a member. It was painless, in my head I compared the process to getting a discount grocery card and thinking "this is actually easier." I couldn't tell if it was their excitement that I was there or if I was wearing the fear of having to pay on my face but they told me I was a guest so I was free and my dues would be paid this year as well. I think this is the norm but it just reminded me of how we always took care of our own. I was grateful and proud because this is how it should be!



After I gave Ed my information I walked over and sat with two white-haired men. As I introduced myself they both gave me the same name. I looked at them puzzled and the son told me this was his father and I could see the pride in him when he told me his grandfather was a founding member of this post. After chatting with them for a few minutes I realized there were still 30 minutes before dinner. I saw this as an opportunity to network as I move back home after being gone so long. That's when Bob and I started talking. He explained why everyone is so interested in the "new guy."

I knew there was a bar at most American Legions but I didn't know they operated on donation basis. As I introduced myself we would swap years we served and branch. It's cool to meet a vet but it's even better when they're from your branch! I sipped on some cheap whiskey for the rest of the night, I didn't have to pay for it and I didn't feel judged by anyone for having it. Bob, Pete and I sat at the same table. Most of the tables were filled by the time dinner came around but the three of us were the most lively of our table.



There was some formality to it, there was a table with a wooden podium on top, one of the official members had a gavel and he would tap it on the podium to get everyone's attention. He spoke and told new guests to get their food first, with ladies following and then everyone else knew to just fall in. I felt out of place in the front of the line with the

women behind me. I kept thinking "I'm young and I have manners, I should be in the back of the line." But as I helped pull aluminum foil off the meatloaf and mashed potatoes I realized something. In this room, I am not the youngest, I am an equal. In this room I am shown the same respect that any other man and woman is, because our age didn't unite us.

I didn't want to finish my dinner before everyone got theirs so I took a selfie where you could see everyone behind me in line. We all bowed our head and someone prayed, then we ate. The meatloaf was good. Like any conversation amongst vets we found ourselves laughing about enemas and someone at our table said "I hope no-one hears us, they'll think we're crazy." But Pete and I agreed, this was a safe haven, we could speak freely in this room because we've all heard worse. And it was true, generally speaking.



After everyone got their food we had time to eat and then formalities started back up. They gave away three walking sticks (probably because the guys they gave them to were too stubborn to use a cane.) Then there was a 50/50 raffle, a few people got up and said a few things about the people that weren't there, and they asked anyone that was new to stand and say something about themselves.



I listened as a few other new members spoke. They had been out for 10 or more years and they were becoming involved now when they have moved to a new place. When I spoke I was given the same respect that the newly retired Air Force officer had been given. No one was more or less impressed by his 27 years compared to my 7.5. They were happy to have us both, equally.

As I heard a few of them start in about Trump I realized that I was in such a unique position. I have the ears of these elders, not as a child but as an equal. I realized that my being there, in their eyes, was enough for them to give me their attention. My having served in the same (but different) military that they served in I was afforded a respect that I'd truly only felt when I actually wore the uniform.

I decided to write this because I think it's important that our younger generation of vets steps up. Whether you served one year or 30, these organizations are there and all they want to do is help us succeed. There was nothing treacherous about my experience. When someone would start talking about Trump, another would speak up and keep the politics from taking over.

I was one of two people in the room that could have been younger than 40. Look in the photos and you'll see an organization of old white males. But the thing is, it doesn't have to be that way. The American Legion is a veteran ran organization that's just there to help us, it's not the military, it's not even the VA, it's more of a support group for the modern day warrior.

