



MICHAEL SCARDINA

LOCATION:
MANCHESTER, NH

Michael Scardina and his daughter, Aria. Michael is a member of the Harbor Home's HVRP staff.

MICHAEL'S STORY: FROM ACTIVE DUTY TO A LIFETIME OF SERVICE TO VETERANS

Joining the Army in 2009, after completion of basic training, Michael Scardina was assigned to short stints of duty in Virginia and Georgia before being deployed to Kuwait later that year. As a truck driver, he was assigned as a member of the security detail to escort convoys that would travel throughout Iraq. Though sometimes hazardous, he enjoyed his assignment and working with the members of his unit.

Discharged in 2013, he took the time to reconnect and catch up with his family, including caring for his daughter, Aria. But it didn't take long for him to discover the transition was going to have some bumps in the road, as he soon became homeless. In his search for a place to stay, he found Harbor Homes in Manchester, New Hampshire; here he found he was not alone in the difficulty of making the transition to civilian life. After spending a short time in transitional housing, he made a connection with Andrea Reed at Harbor Homes that led to her offering Michael part-time employment working in the computer center.

His basic responsibilities in the computer lab began with helping other veterans. He would help them create their resumes and give them the opportunity to increase their computer literacy levels by setting them up with an account at Lynda.com. Many of the veterans he worked with were older and needed to be taught the basics about computers. Michael had monthly targets to meet, which were measured by how many veterans he provided services to and helped. He successfully met those requirements, creating a foundation upon which he would take on more responsibility. His competency in training and developing resumes greatly improved over time, and soon Andrea added the additional responsibility of doing intake with the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) as a full-time staff member.

Michael later had an opportunity to return to the transitional housing program that once served him, but this time as someone who provided the services. Here he worked with the residents of transitional housing, as well as those in the community. The job was less computer-oriented and more people-oriented, and he said that to be successful he had to approach situations and people with an open mind.

He still does some of his favorite work helping veterans learn how to use computers, but he has learned to expand his horizons. He now also helps them apply to specific employers and performs regular community outreach with local employers with the hope of finding new opportunities for veteran employment. These added responsibilities have worked together to allow Michael to develop new personal and professional relationships; in fact, networking in the community has led to some employers putting him near the top of their speed dial list.

But employment is not his only responsibility. Michael also develops relationships with other homeless shelters, outreach centers, and mental health providers, leading them to funnel potential clients to him. Once clients are referred, he utilizes his knowledge and experience to set them up with employment and educational opportunities and point them in the right direction to begin their own journey to success.



Michael with his daughter and former Governor of New Hampshire Maggi Hassan at the 2016 Stand Down.

Helping Other Veterans Succeed

Michael calls working at Harbor Houses “a passion,” explaining that he has a strong desire and commitment to working with and recommending it as a place where veterans can begin making what can be a difficult and challenging adjustment to civilian life. He said he believes that if a veteran makes the effort, and the organization does its part, that person can “end up in a different place.” But to do this, the person must be willing to approach his or her situation and opportunities with an open mind.

As an example, Michael worked with a couple of veterans who had their driver’s licenses revoked. As a former truck driver, he knew the importance of having a license to obtain employment, whether it was working for a delivery service or working as a landscaper. Knowing the terrain, he was able to quickly resolve the issues. In some cases, substance abuse was the underlying cause for not having a license, so he connected with treatment centers to which he could refer veterans. Once those problems were dealt with, the veterans could move forward with their lives.

On Ending Veteran Homelessness

From a provider viewpoint, Michael believes his organization is an effective and successful source for helping end the homeless veteran problem in his community. The number one factor in ending homelessness, he states, is employment. Beyond just making money, being employed gives people the feeling they are productive, have value to society, and contribute to the community. Having been homeless himself, being homeless and its resulting problems are something he can relate to.

Michael realizes employment is not the only factor that alleviates homelessness. He states that finding training opportunities and providing training tools are both important parts of the process. Formal education, such as going to a 4-year college or vocational training program, is often a standard answer to solving employment problems with veterans who are homeless. However, many veterans simply want to get back to work and earn a living. School is a future option, but not an immediate answer for many of them.

Michael says of his work: “The job is challenging, and because you see real results helping people, there is almost nothing that you don’t like about your job. You work in a laid-back, relaxed environment and the people you meet have a shared experience of serving in the military. As a boss, you cannot do much better than Andrea. Sometimes it’s hard to know when you are at work and when you are with family.”

He notes that once veterans have a job, it is important to help them keep their jobs. Staying in close contact with veterans is critical. They need to know they have a support channel available to them if things become difficult. Veterans need to know there are other jobs out there, so they know they have options and can continue to move forward if one job doesn’t work out.

Finding the right fit for veterans is also critical, especially as it relates to longevity, Michael explains. To do this, HVRP staff members need to know veteran clients well—their likes and dislikes that go beyond a superficial level. Listening is key. Programs must try to find a balance between the reality of the job market and what it offers and the personal expectations clients have when looking for a job. Going in the opposite direction of where veterans want to go will likely result in them leaving a job sooner rather than later.

In closing, Michael explained that the key to success is to evaluate veterans' personal and career goals as they relate to employment. Staff may end up crossing over to some more personal goals, but that helps in evaluating the type of job that is best for each veteran, as their personal goals and career expectations are closely

connected. Case managers should also separate short-term from long-term goals, taking veterans from where they need to be now to where they want to be in 5 to 10 years. The veteran's goals may change every week or every month, so it is important that they are on a path of success and continue to talk about their goals—open communication lines are vital.

It is through open communication and active listening that Michael has been able to assist so many veterans in their quest for housing and employment. He practices what he preaches, and the HVRP clients are greatly helped by his passion to help improve their lives. Although making the transition from military to civilian life can be challenging, the hope is that Michael's story will encourage others to become a part of the solution.

Advice to HVRP Colleagues

From Michael's perspective, the best piece of advice that can be given to people who are truly interested in helping homeless veterans is to be a good listener:

- Ask questions if you don't understand or need to clarify something.
- Pay attention and listen to their goals—what they want out of life, as well as what they want regarding employment.
- Ask how they see your role in their life. Whether you serve as a case manager or help them learn a computer skill, reaching an agreement about your role will establish boundaries and allow reasonable expectations to be created—for both sides.

Michael notes that “if there is a phrase I would use to describe how to be a good listener, it is ‘situational awareness.’ Be aware of and sensitive to the needs of the veteran within their situation.”