

Retiree actively helps people in time of need

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Editor

While on active duty, he witnessed the signing of the 1953 armistice agreement between the Koreans and 20 years later watched another cease fire being signed in Vietnam.

During his career as a supply sergeant he took care of soldiers. He made sure they had the “bullets and beans,” to get the job done. After his retirement in 1977 he’s continued to help people with needs. Instead of issuing bullets and beans, he gives widows of service members the tools to collect rightful benefits due to them — all as a volunteer.

Retired Sgt. 1st Class David Downing stumbled into his position when the person who had the job said he would “return” after a trip to Japan.

“The retirement services person said, ‘Look Downing, I’ve gotta go to Japan and I’ll be back in two or three weeks. So would you please take my place,’” recalls Downing. “You know I’m still looking for the guy to come back — he’s never returned,” he said with a chuckle under a labored breath.

“I know the system,” Downing said. “I know it because I’ve been doing it so long. It is like an addiction to help someone.”

Downing’s ability to move widows through the bureaucracy of retrieving benefits is a passion for him. One of his first cases involved a lady whose husband died nine years prior to her coming to see Downing.

“I can remember Kum Ok Williams as the toughest case I’ve ever worked,” Downing grimaced as he shook his head. “It took her nine years to collect from the U.S. Government. However, when she got her money she got 39,000 bucks,” he said chuckling. “She got it all back —and I mean everything. The sad thing of the whole case is that she died shortly after that.”

Since Downing volunteers his time and effort, he still can’t figure out what drives him to do it.

“I don’t know why I do it for free,” Downing

said. “I guess I’m like the ground’s keeper the U.S. Embassy left behind in China in 1949 when they left and basically said ‘You look after the place and we’ll be back someday.’ Well the U.S. did return — 14 years later and the guy was still there taking care of the grounds. He was dedicated — I guess I’m like that guy — waiting for someone to return.”

Downing survives on his pension and social security which in today’s Korean economy isn’t much anymore.

“I retired in country because my wife is Korean,” said the 6’ 1”, 320-pound Downing. “Also, when I retired my pension was great here because the hourly wage here was less than a dollar. I could really get by, but now I feel the pinch,” he said looking down at the floor of his 30 foot by 20 foot one bedroom apartment.

“Oh I still don’t mind helping folks,” he said with a smile. “I usually get paid with ice cream or an occasional meal.”

He didn’t always help people out of his home. His position at one time was a GS-7 position. However, shortly after he took the job, the Army realigned jobs and he was out the gate — again.

“In 1989 I was told, ‘Downing, we’re going to give you this job —Retirement Service Officer, a GS-7 position’” he said. “I’m not a complete fool, I said ‘Great!’ My wife would be delighted because she always wanted me to get a real job. Well, when the job was put in for a permanent position, J3 said it belonged in PERSCOM (Personnel Command) and they didn’t have a slot for it,” Downing said shaking his head in disbelief. “I was out of a job eight months after being in it.”

Downing’s time is limited because not only has age crept up on the gentle giant, but sickness as well. He recently returned after seeing cancer specialists in California.

“They wanted to operate on me, but I said ‘No thanks, I’d much rather take it easy at home,’” he said. “I don’t get out much now and I do all my assisting from my apartment, using the phone and calling my contacts in the states.”

The “contacts” Downing uses in the states are

people who work in either Social Security, Department of Veteran's Affairs, or other federal agencies.

"I call them all the time," Downing said. "I have a working relationship with them. I ask them for forms I can't get here and they either fax it to me or mail it. Plus they help me put paper work through — they make stuff happen," he said behind a perspiring smile.

Downing's dedication is legendary among retirees here, said Kelly Measells, chief, Casualty Assistance Branch, Eighth United States Army.

"Downing is the person who reaches down into the cracks and helps those who would usually get passed up in the system," Measells said.

One of the accounts of help Measells said Downing really came through for was for a Japanese widow whose husband had died and her landlord was abusing her.

"She was schizophrenic and in bad shape," Measells said. "Her visa had expired and she was facing a 5 million won fine which she couldn't afford. Downing jumped in and contacted the Korean government, U.S. Embassy and the Veterans Affairs here. He got her medevaced from 121st General Hospital to a VA Hospital somewhere in the states.

"Not only did he get her medevaced, but he also got her all the back pay she hadn't been collecting on her husband who was retired military — I mean got it all and social security," Measells said. "Now the lady is living happily in San Diego someplace."

Downing has had personal involvement in over 1,500 cases, Measells said. "We stopped counting because his work is just incredible and it seems not to stop."

Measells worries about his friend's health and what is to come of him, but knows in his heart that Downing doesn't want it any other way.

"Downing is ambulatory right now," Measells said. "The doctors have told him to stay in bed and rest, but he's not doing it. His wife is superstitious and feels that there is too much 'death' coming into the house. So he meets the widows who need help at Gate 20 and they go to a coffee shop or something to discuss the case. He does all of this by putting his own life on the line — he is amazing. There are so many times

that Downing has done what seems impossible, possible. He is always smiling even though everything has become difficult because of his health," his seven-year friend said.