

# Catching YOUR Memories

THE PODCAST

WITH DIANE ATWOOD

## Vet2Vet Maine

An interview with volunteer Sam Kelley and his wife Jean and Vet2Vet Maine's Executive Director Sue Gold

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[00:00:00] **Diane Atwood:** everybody has a story, an experience, or a memory to share. If only someone would ask. That's where I come in. I'm Diane Atwood and you are listening to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. Today's story is about an organization called Vet to Vet Maine, which pairs veteran volunteers here in Maine with other veterans who need a friend and or mentor. Sam Kelly begins today's episode. He is a Vietnam vet who was deeply affected by his experience. For the past 15 years or so, he's attended regular reunions with some of the men he served with. They even wrote a book together. The Old Guard: Echo Company's Vietnam Legacy. The reunions have been a huge gift to Sam, and for the past few years, he's been giving the gift of his friendship and support to other vets by being a Vet2Vet Maine volunteer. He shares what being a volunteer entails, what it means to him, and why he thinks the program is so important.

Sam's wife Jean also weighs in on the impact she thinks being a volunteer has had on him. First here is Sam Kelly.

[00:01:17] **Sam Kelley:** My name is Robert Sam Kelly. Uh, Sam is the nickname that people know me by. I've been involved in this organization called Vet to Vet for about five or six years. I guess it's been something like that.[00:01:30] This is an organization about, one veteran visiting another veteran. Generally, the other veteran was homebound, maybe in a nursing home or whatever type of thing, or just needed somebody to come visit according to his family. Sue Gold started this organization and It's a wonderful organization.

First veteran I visited was down in Old Orchard Beach and I visited for about three years or so, and, uh, visited him every other week. Over several years, it was a bunch of visits and, uh, he eventually passed, he was a little older than me. He was a Second World War veteran. So then, I got assigned another veteran who was in a nursing home. And, I visited him about every one or two weeks. But, he had been pretty sick and he ended up passing on, and, um, now I've been assigned to another individual who's a Second World War veteran. And, uh, he's in an assisted living facility in Portland. I visit him about once every seven to 10 days. He and his wife and, uh, he's a character. He really is. And we have a great time. We have a wonderful relationship and he's 96 and his wife is 93. And, I think it's good for him and it's good for me. And, uh, his wife is a lovely lady. She really is.

[00:02:52] **Diane Atwood:** So you interact not only with the veteran, but also if there's a partner or spouse, you interact with them too. Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Do [00:03:00] you sort of become like a family member sometimes?

[00:03:02] **Sam Kelley:** Yeah, very much like a part of his family.

[00:03:05] **Diane Atwood:** I am gonna talk to Sue, but from your point of view, what's the point of what you do?

[00:03:12] **Sam Kelley:** I think from the perspective of myself as a volunteer going to visit. I've always been involved with organizations that have given back to the community type of thing. You know, whether it's the JCs or the Chamber of Commerce or Let's Talk America, Project Grace, all different groups I've been involved with. Being a veteran and I can see where, you know, visiting somebody who doesn't have much relationship outside of maybe his own immediate family, who is also a veteran, I think it's a good way to give back to the community. And, uh, like I say, this is my third veteran and I've got a lot out of it. I think I've given to the person a lot also. I know at this facility there's 12 to 15 veterans there who, as I understand, would like to have a veteran come and visit them. Okay. So I think that here in Maine it's important.

[00:04:09] **Diane Atwood:** You know, you veterans, I'm being real stereotypical here though, are notorious for not wanting to talk about things usually. Right. And you hold it all inside. But by going and visiting somebody who knows? Who knows what they carry inside and if they've got another vet who's been there and understands and you're just being the buddy. Yeah. [00:04:30] That seems like this would be such a good relationship opportunity on so many levels.

[00:04:35] **Sam Kelley:** It is. Yeah. No, I get, I get a lot out of it and I think, uh, hopefully, the veteran gets a lot out of it, the veteran I'm visiting and, um, I give Sue great credit for creating this organization here. It's a wonderful group of, we need more volunteers because we have veterans out there that need somebody, but we don't have enough people to cover that.

[00:04:58] **Diane Atwood:** And so if Sam Kelly can do it, anybody can, huh?

[00:05:00] **Sam Kelley:** you might be right.

[00:05:04] **Diane Atwood:** do you have anything you'd like to say about what it's like for him? or what you've noticed?

[00:05:10] **Jean Kelley:** I've noticed lots of things in 49 years of marriage. Um, I think this whole ... Tell the good things. I am. I'm ok, I'm open to anything. I think that it's almost been redemptive for him in that it's a way that he can connect because anybody that has been through war, and I'm projecting this, I have no experience. Um, there are memories that are etched in your psyche forever. And some people handle it differently. He's actually had counseling since the nineties. PTSD erupts whenever there's another American invasion or inclusion in a particular area, but he's in a good place right now. So that's good. Mm-hmm. And I think it's helped. I think it's definitely helped.

[00:06:00] **Diane Atwood:** Being the volunteer?

[00:06:01] **Jean Kelley:** Yeah. Well I think it's all also, we all feel comfortable with people who are familiar with our own backgrounds and whatever our career experiences happen to be because you have more in common.

[00:06:13] **Diane Atwood:** Sue Gold is Vet2Vet Maine's executive director. She began as a Vista volunteer at the Southern Maine Agency on Aging. The agency was interested in creating a program for veterans, and Sue helped figure out what that program might look like. She explains how it evolved.

[00:06:38] **Susan Gold:** They wanted to serve veterans, specifically, older veterans, and they didn't have anything designed for that. And so they applied for Vista. Volunteer, which I was, to help them figure out what they could do for veterans. So in my year of service, I did some research, learned that veterans, well, several veterans told me they would not ask for help from anyone other than another veteran. And, I had earlier in my life, started a chronic pain support group. So I was well-versed in the benefits of a peer-to-peer support system. As I did develop this program, I decided that it would be great to have a friendly

visitor program that was based on peer-to-peer support. And so that's how it came to be. We would be training volunteers who were veterans themselves to visit other veterans who were either socially isolated, lonely, had health issues, whatever put them in a category where they could really use a friend. And we saw the need for this in several different ways, first of all, I think it's a real health issue. Social isolation and loneliness have been connected to all kinds of health issues, mental and physical. So we felt that this would be a good way to address those issues by providing a friend who could be there and could connect people to other people. Another reason for this program was that only about a third of Maine's veterans were even taking advantage of the benefits and services that they had through the VA.

[00:08:20] **Diane Atwood:** Because they didn't know about it or they just again, didn't wanna reach out and ask?

[00:08:24] **Susan Gold:** Well, they're a combination. I think for some people, they preferred to do it privately, for other people, and I ran into a number of veterans from the Vietnam era who didn't wanna have anything to do with the government, and that included the VA. A number of people didn't realize they could get benefits, and we had, we have a number of veterans who weren't in combat, who didn't think that they would qualify for benefits, which they do in a number of cases. So, that was another goal of ours, is to get people enrolled in the VA and help them know about the benefits and services that could help improve their lives. And we also connected them with services in the community, like Meals on Wheels, case workers if they needed it, and a number of other kinds of services that were out there. And then, I think a third reason that was really important to me and to many people we wanted these veterans to know that they had not been forgotten, that we honored their service. And this went to veterans, not only who were in combat, but people who signed up and pledged their lives. They might not have been involved in a war, but they had pledged that they would be involved. And I really feel strongly that that's an obligation of all citizens and, you know, veterans love to take care of other veterans, but I think it's also incumbent on the rest of us to make sure that these people aren't forgotten and know that we appreciate their service. There are a lot of efforts now to get stories, but you know, we've had several people say, as Jean did that, you know, their spouse or their father or whatever, never shared any of these stories until our veteran came and then just opened up the flood waters and you know, I, one of my inspirations was my father's best friend who had lost both of his legs by stepping on a mine in World War ii. And he was just a tremendous addition to our childhood, he always came up with the best presents and he had a boat and he took us out on, but he never talked about the [00:10:30] war and we never knew anything until way late in his life, probably a few months before he died, I went to visit him and he started talking about what,

what he went through. And I thought, you know, I bet there's lots of veterans out there who need to do this. So this, that's another benefit of this program. But another thing they were working on, um, developing a volunteer program and this also gave veterans a chance to have a worthwhile thing to do in their life. So it benefited the volunteers as well as the veterans that they were visiting. So I think it's really a 50-50 deal, even if the veteran that you're visiting can't respond as a friend because of health issues or whatever. I think as Sam says it, it really does enrich the volunteer's life doing this kind of work.

[00:11:23] **Sam Kelley:** Yeah, it's definitely a win-win situation. Yeah. There's no doubt about that. Yeah, no doubt about that at all.

[00:11:27] **Diane Atwood:** And so now you're no longer at the Southern Maine Agency on Aging. You branched out on your own.

[00:11:34] **Susan Gold:** Right. In 2017, we had a quasi-board at that point, at SMAA that was dedicated to Vet2Vet and we decided that we'd really like to expand and include younger people and we do have a number of younger volunteers and younger recipients who are receiving visits. And we also wanted to try to expand throughout the whole state, and we are slowly doing that as well. And so, we met with SMAA and had an agreement that we would become our own 501C3. We left in June of 2018 and we received our, assessment as a 501C3 in early 2019.

[00:12:18] **Diane Atwood:** So that's a process, isn't it?

[00:12:20] **Susan Gold:** It is, and it's a lot of work but we've got a tremendous board. We've got some really good staff members, so it's gone really well. And we've been fortunate to get grants and support from the communities.

[00:12:33] **Diane Atwood:** That doesn't just show up on your doorstep, so you or somebody needs to be writing these proposals for the grants, and how does that work?

[00:12:43] **Susan Gold:** Uh, yes. That's been my job pretty much.

[00:12:46] **Diane Atwood:** As well as find the volunteers and match and.

[00:12:48] **Susan Gold:** Well, at first I did everything, but it grew to the point where we needed to hire people. So we've had a wonderful program director, Judie O'Malley, who's been with us for a couple years now, and she's done a great job working with new volunteers and, and being a support for the veteran

teams. If there's a problem, she'll, for example, if somebody needs a ride, she can work with that or whatever, whatever issue comes up, she can work with them. And she also interviews the veteran friends, we call them, the people who wanna volunteer. And we have had a couple of great, volunteer coordinators who've also assisted Judie in that process.

[00:13:29] **Diane Atwood:** When you talk about volunteers, you're not just talking about a volunteer to go and visit a fellow veteran, you're talking about volunteers to help keep the program moving.

[00:13:37] **Susan Gold:** Absolutely. And grow. We've had both, wonderful volunteers in both levels. The people who volunteered to visit are, have to be veterans, and we have men and women, both, um, young and old and in between. We have a couple of 90-year-old volunteers. They've been with the program a long time too.

[00:13:53] **Diane Atwood:** So what do you look for in a volunteer?

[00:13:57] **Susan Gold:** Well, we want them to have a commitment to veterans and other veterans. And a commitment to our mission of helping, being a friend is basically what they are. We do give them some training on what to look for if there's a problem or how to deal with difficult situations, that kind of thing, but it's basically becoming a friend and we have some terrific volunteers.

[00:14:19] **Diane Atwood:** So I can tell people how to get in touch with you. Why don't you tell people how can they, get in touch with you?

[00:14:26] **Susan Gold:** We encourage people to go to our website. We have a lot of information on it. You can volunteer right online. We also have recordings from some of our volunteers on what they do and why they do it. It's uh, www dot v e t, the number two v e t m a i n e.org. It's Vet2VetMaine.org. And that will tell you how you can support us financially or you can support us as a volunteer. you can read our newsletters. There's all kinds of material there. I love your newsletter. Oh, thank you. I'm on the list.

[00:15:00] **Sam Kelley:** I just wanna say, what a gift Sue has given to the veterans here in Southern Maine, all State it is a real gift that she's provided to us and, I'm very proud to be part of it.

[00:15:13] **Diane Atwood:** You have been listening to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. If you would like to read a transcript of this episode or leave a comment, go to [catchingyourmemories.com](http://catchingyourmemories.com). You'll also find direct links to the

Vet2Vet Maine website and to the book about Echo Company that Sam contributed to. Be sure to come back next month for another episode of Catching Your Memories, and if you have stories or memories you would rather not share in a podcast but would like to preserve for your family, I also record personal interviews. You can learn more about that at [catchingyourmemories.com](http://catchingyourmemories.com) or send me an email. [diane@dianeatwood.com](mailto:diane@dianeatwood.com). This podcast was created, produced, recorded, and edited by me, Diane Atwood, catching your memories, the interview of a lifetime.[00:16:30]

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