

CASPER STAR TRIBUNE



Ben Barto of Dubois stands with his Horns for Heroes Foundation trailer. The foundation recently obtained nonprofit status.

Dubois artist Ben Barto is a man of many interests. Among them are handcrafting objects out of shed antlers or horns, supporting veterans — both through employing them and the sale of the products they make — and motorcycling.

His 2-year-old Horns for Heroes is now officially a nonprofit foundation, having achieved recent 501(c)(3) status.

“Now they can donate money direct to us,” Barto said on a recent brief stop in Casper. He and his hornsforheroes.org wrapped trailer were en route to Minneapolis for this weekend’s 100th annual National American Legion Convention.

Barto has partnered with American Legion posts all across Wyoming as drop-off points for horns and shed antlers.

The mission of the foundation is to provide financial assistance for veterans and their families in need and to train and secure employment for veterans through the production and sale of antler products.

He is now hiring veterans and training them to create antler products in his Dubois shop. They make knives, chandeliers, jewelry, antler dog treats, and all of kinds of artisan crafts. In addition to veterans, Barto — who is the son of a veteran and who was disqualified from military service because of a high school football injury — wants also to include sons of veterans and auxiliary members.

“All of this is just to help the veterans,” Barto said. “I just really want to help veterans.”

Barto, 65, said an encounter with Sgt. First Class (Ret.) Dana Bowman, 82nd Airborne, the first double amputee to ever be re-enlisted back into the military, spurred his drive. Bowman’s foundation, Halo for Freedom Warrior Foundation, gave Barto the inspiration for his own.

Bowman lost his legs during an annual Golden Knights Parachute Team training in 1994 and still makes more than 100 jumps a year, carrying a huge American flag when he jumps. As he unfurls the flag, he requests the playing of Lee Greenwood’s, “God Bless the USA,” followed by the National Anthem.

Through his craftsmanship, Barto has also met 103-year-old Dick Cole, now the only surviving member of Doolittle’s Raiders. Barto crafted a custom hat pin to commemorate the group’s 60th anniversary in 2002, and at that time, there were 12 Raiders still alive.

Barto’s father was a B-52 bomber radio operator in World War II, so Barto has been fond of the military and its role all of his life.

Barto explained that searching for shed antlers is an activity unto itself in Wyoming, and he hopes those who enjoy the activity will share their bounty with his foundation.

In addition, traditional hunters who hunt for meat may donate the horns from their kill to the foundation.

“They can donate them or we will pay them top dollar,” Barto said. “That’s what cash contributions to the foundation go towards.”

Depending on the complexity of the product, a craft may take from two weeks — for a fairly simple knife — to up to a year to produce. Finished products are sold through the website, hornsforheroes.org, and at trade and outdoors shows throughout the country.

In addition to his trademark big black hat, Barto may also be identifiable to the region’s motorcyclists as the skeleton costumed “Bone Daddy,” at the annual Beartooth Rally in Red Lodge, Montana.

“I’m kind of their mascot,” he said, “and I get a kick out of that.”

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