

Finisher Rises to the Challenge with a Flip of the Coin

Reliable Plating Works and Elite Finishing help veterans with a challenge coin.

No way Jaime Maliszewski could turn down the request.

The president of Reliable Plating Works and Elite Finishing in Milwaukee knew he would be involved in some way.

First, the request came from a former high school classmate. Second, it involved veterans of the U.S. military, which is about as close as you can get to Maliszewski's heart.

His former classmate, Barb Bigalke, needed help with a project she was working on at the Center for Suicide Awareness (CSA) in the Wisconsin area, a program specifically designed to help ward off suicides by former members of the armed forces.

Nationwide, 22 U.S. veterans die by suicide every day. Bigalke, the CSA executive director and founder, wanted to start an outreach program called "Challenge Coin" to mint coins that police officers and others could give veterans at risk of harming themselves as a way to connect and direct them to help.

"I called Jaime on the phone and asked, 'Do you remember me?'" Bigalke says with a chuckle. "I knew he was in the metal working business, and I didn't know who else to ask."

Challenge coins have been used by the military for decades as a way to symbolize brotherhood and unity. They are usually given to prove membership when veterans meet, and to enhance morale. Belonging and sticking together are two things most military personnel are taught.

Bigalke's idea was to have the message "#missionconversation" stamped on a challenge coin of their own. The words "Tell Me Your Story" and "Listen to Mine" are also engraved on the coin, which shows a U.S. flag on one side and the hands of two soldiers clasping on the other.

The final message: "We fought for our freedom. We must fight for each other."

That's all Maliszewski needed to hear. He got on the phone and asked a few manufacturing friends about how to get the coins made. Once he found someone to make them, Maliszewski wrote a check.

"I sent some seed money to help the project and help spread the word where I could," he says.

"Barb and her support group

took this thing and grew the heck out of it without any PR or news help."

CSA's first several hundred coins went to local police officers and other first responders who often came in contact with veterans during intense situations, such as police calls.

Bigalke says that officers have told her that when they learn someone in a stressful situation is a veteran, they pull them aside and hand them the Challenge Coin.

"Police officers have told me that they will ask a veteran to walk away and talk with them, and they put the coin in their hand and things change instantly," she says.

"They know what a Challenge Coin is, and what it means. It changes the entire tone of the situation."

Hopefully, the coin will stay in veterans'

pockets with the #missionconversation hashtag and the "hope line" 741741 number to text if they ever need someone to talk to.

"Most everyone has a mobile phone, and even the government gives cell phones out to people at risk just so they can have a point of contact," Bigalke says.

A police officer in Wisconsin told Bigalke that the Challenge Coin was used recently to de-escalate a situation involving a veteran who wanted to hurt himself and others. She says the coin was something that resonated with the veteran, who eventually talked with professionals and got help.

The CSA Challenge Coin has grown from 1,000 initial coins in 2015 to more than 20,000 in circulation in most of Wisconsin. CSA helped broaden its reach by offering up a "22 Challenge" for the 22 veterans on average daily who take their own life. Supporters can buy 22 coins for \$10 each and direct them to the police department or social agency of their choice to distribute to veterans.

Maliszewski bought an additional 100 coins and had Bigalke send them to the Franklin, Wisconsin, police department, where they were soon handed out to veterans at risk.

"The #missionconversation and the text number can be used anywhere," she says. "And someone always gets right back with them, saying 'Tell me what is happening to you.' It is that quick."

Maliszewski says he was only helping his small part of the world, something that is dear to his heart and everyone else who works at Reliable Plating Works and Elite Finishing.

"Everyone should know about the Challenge Coin program," he says. "We can't keep losing 22 vets each day."

Bigalke is just thankful Maliszewski pointed her in the right direction, let alone seeded the costs for the first minting.

"If it wasn't for Jaime, I'm not sure if we would have gotten this off the ground," she says. "Who knows how many veterans we have saved just by him saying he would help." ■■

Contact Barb Bigalke at barb@centerforsuicideawareness.org, or visit centerforsuicideawareness.org for more information.



TIM PENNINGTON / EDITOR
tim.pennington@pfonline.com

"We fought for our freedom. We must fight for each other."