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Soldiers leave legacy of sustainability

Marisa Petrich/Northwest Guardian

Published: 12:40PM August 18th, 2011

The 23rd Chemical Battalion, 555th Engineer Brigade headquarters building on Joint Base Lewis-McChord's Lewis North looks much the same as the others in the area — but there's one notable difference.

Just outside the front door is a small vegetable garden, full of produce grown by and for Soldiers in the unit. It's a visible sign of the brigade's strong culture of sustainability, and a nod to what the unit would like to see in the future.

"We're really trying to get after the holistic, environmentally friendly perspective," 23rd Chem. Bn. commander Lt. Col. Sean Kirschner said.

The unit is the first on base to create its own Victory Garden, a reference to those started during World War II to ease strain on the nation's food supply, but it has also extended its efforts in plenty of other directions. Its proactive approach to recycling programs, including the JBLM Aluminum Can Challenge, energy conservation and getting involved with environmental efforts around base has been exceptional.

"From what I have seen, yes, they are going above and beyond," JBLM sustainability outreach coordinator Miriam Villacian said.

The garden started in June of this year, realizing a goal Kirschner's been working toward for years. He'd always wanted to start a garden, but seemed to change stations every summer. This year, he jumped at the opportunity to get a plot in the JBLM community garden and create a space for the Soldiers in his unit to cultivate — and eat — fresh produce of their own.

"I think it's the right thing to do for the environment, for health, for nutrition," Kirschner said.

Months later, the Victory Garden is producing artichokes, strawberries, cauliflower, eggplant and plenty more.

Kirschner believes in leading by example, and he's not the only one. Second Lieutenant Nathan Barnes helped install the garden earlier this summer and makes a point of volunteering around base, including with JBLM Fish and Wildlife to restore native prairie plants to areas on base.

He took time out of his week to dig ditches, get rid of invasive species like Scotch broom and plant native vegetation — and he worked hard, according to Villacian. To Barnes, though, it doesn't seem that exceptional.

"How could I expect my Soldiers to be good citizens if I'm not one first?" Barnes said.

It's an attitude found throughout the unit. Staff Sgt. Matthew Carter rides his bike to work instead of driving, and participated in JBLM's Bike to Work Month challenge in May. Environmental officer Master Sgt. Richard Butterworth's devotion to properly sorting the recycling has earned him the nickname "the Dumpster Nazi."

"I go through dumpsters and I pull things out constantly," he said.

It may seem a bit extreme, but the dedication is paying off. When recycling coordinator Capt. Marcie Blasingame came to the 23rd Chem. Bn., they were at 35 percent environmental compliance. Now the unit is at 95 percent compliance, and they're hoping the idea is



Ingrid Barrentine
Lt. Col. Sean Kirschner, left, 23rd Chem. Bn. commander, and Maj. Scott Gould sit next to their battalion's garden Aug. 5.



spreading.

The best case scenario is that Soldiers take the best practices they learn at work and pass them on to even more people from there. For those leading the charge, this would make it all worth it.

“I don’t have kids yet, so I don’t just think about myself, I think about my future,” Blasingame said. Kirschner agreed.

“My children are growing up right now and the legacy that I leave is for them,” he said.

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