



"A job helps pay bills, but it's also part of my dignity," says Erlandson (clearing brush at a day job March 10 and, above, in the Navy in '91).



**People
FIRST**

HELP AMERICA'S VETERANS

BACK TO WORK

Mark and Tori Baird's HirePatriots website has helped thousands find jobs after serving their country **BY JOHNNY DODD**

GROOMER: AMANDA ABIZAD/ZENOBIA; INSET: COURTESY GREG ERLANDSON

It's been another long and brutal workweek for machine specialist Greg Erlandson and, as on every Friday evening, the soft-spoken Navy veteran is racing to his computer in hopes of lining up odd jobs for the weekend. Despite having full-time work, after racking up debt during years of unemployment, he needs the \$185 that his weekend jobs pay. "Sure, it would be nice to get a day off," says Erlandson with a good-natured chuckle. "But I have too many bills, and these day jobs are the only thing keeping me above water."

Not long ago this 20-year Navy vet was homeless with his wife and three sons. He credits an online job board, hirepatriots.com, and the couple behind it, Mark and Tori Baird, for turning his life around, just as they have done for thousands of others looking for work after military service. "The most therapeutic thing for a guy who's been in combat is work," says Mark, 62, a retired Christian pastor. "It gives them purpose and direction."

In February 2005 he and Tori launched a job board to match retired or active-duty military with local residents who need yards mowed, plumbing fixed or homes painted. "Within a few months we were getting 10,000 visitors a week," says Mark. "There are a lot of young guys who get out and have all the military bravado, then slam into reality, and it's real hard to find a job."

With the jobless rate among young post-9/11 veterans 5 points higher than the national average, the need is clear. "A squadron commander may have incredible leadership skills, but it doesn't translate into the civilian sector," says retired Lt. Gen. Donald Jones. And while many veterans have training paid for by the GI bill, says Jones, "it can take months to get certified; that can mean months without a paycheck."

Having lived that way for much longer, the Erlandsons see those job links as a godsend. "I've got no idea what we would have done without the Bairds," says Greg's wife, Denette, 44. "They've just always been there for our family and for plenty of folks like us."



"Our vision is a nationwide employment safety net," says Mark (with Tori).

HirePatriots

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Mark and Tori Baird had no intention of becoming an employment agency. But one afternoon in 2004, a marine, just home from Iraq, knocked on their door in Oceanside, Calif. The marine said he needed \$100 to get his family's electricity turned back on and asked if they had any odd jobs. "I offered to give him the hundred dollars," recalls Mark. "But he said, 'No, sir. I don't want a handout. I want to work.'" They found a dozen jobs around their house and, five hours later, the soldier left with his pay. Today you can post an opening anywhere in the U.S. on their website. The couple are currently working to create chapters of their organization in other parts of the nation. "We're on a mission," says Mark. "Helping these service members is the electricity that makes our engines run."



A 2008 HirePatriots job fair.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Hire a veteran. Businesses and individuals can post full-time positions or one-day jobs. **2. Donate.** Give \$25 to help create a national jobs network and fund transitional training. **3. Get involved.** Start a HirePatriots chapter in your area. **Go to hirepatriots.com and follow the PEOPLEFirst buttons.**

Since retiring from the Navy in 2000, after two decades spent maintaining everything from diesel engines to air-conditioning systems, Erlandson, 52, struggled to find full-time work. He qualified initially for a pension of \$1,200 per month, which dropped to \$600 five years ago due to budget cuts.

The family's situation got so bad in 2010 that they spent seven months living in a tent at Camp Pendleton. "That was pretty much the lowest point," recalls Erlandson, whose already-tight finances were further strained—despite having military health insurance—after oldest son Dillon, 18, was diagnosed

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with leukemia last August. (Their other boys are Trever, 11, and Jake, 7)

Shortly after Erlandson was laid off from a job running sheet-metal cutting machinery in April 2006, he learned about HirePatriots from a Marine buddy. Not only did he come to depend on their day jobs during the two years he spent looking for full-time work, but he eventually found a permanent position maintaining manufacturing machinery after posting his résumé on their website. When that job ended in

another layoff, Erlandson went back to searching hirepatriots.com, taking every job he could find.

The Bairds first met him at one of the job fairs they organized. “He’s a down-to-earth, humble man, who had a good résumé and was obviously very intelligent,” recalls Tori, 52, a retired businesswoman. “But like a lot of guys, he wasn’t getting hired.” And when the Erlandsons were homeless, the Bairds loaned Greg the RV they had once lived in after selling their own home, having sunk their life savings into HirePatriots. “After three years we ran out of money,” says Mark. “We just kept working—thank God for free Wi-Fi at Starbucks!” Now grandparents, he and Tori have moved to Big Bear, Calif., where they work from a rented cabin.

The rewards, they say, outweigh the sacrifice. In eight years they have filled more than 50,000 day jobs and assisted some 1,500 veterans in finding full-time employment by helping them polish résumés and by making calls on their behalf to vet recruiters around the nation. Those hiring are also pleased, they say. “It’s not uncommon to get

calls telling me what a great worker and great person Greg is,” says Tori. “I get lots of calls. Those one-day jobs give civilians an opportunity to meet veterans and let them understand their reality.”

That has made a life-changing difference for Erlandson. “I get tired, let me tell you,” he admits. “But I’ve got a family to provide for. That’s what gets me up in the morning”

20.4%

UNEMPLOYMENT
 RATE FOR
 VETS AGES 18–24

50,000

HIREPATRIOTS DAY
 JOBS SINCE 2005

1,500

FULL-TIME JOBS
 PROVIDED

Unemployment
 figures from the Bureau
 of Labor Statistics

With Sharon Cotliar



“I keep telling myself that things are going to pick up and turn around,” says Greg (with his family, from left, Trever, 11; Jake, 7; Dillon, 18; and Denette).