

How to give gracefully

Mike Mountz, creator of the free wash program Grace for Vets, talks to *PC&D*.

Mike Mountz knows about car washes. He is the CEO of Cloister Wash & Lube, a chain of washes based in Ephrata, PA. He also knows about war veterans. During the Vietnam War, Mountz was injured and found himself inside a military hospital in Valley Forge, PA, surrounded by amputees. Not injured to the extent of the men and women around him, Mountz was, and remains, personally and profoundly moved by what he witnessed. That day he vowed to help veterans in some way.

In 2004, Mountz found that way. He created the “Grace For Vets” program, which provides free washes to all veterans on Veterans Day. The program is not only a way of saying “thank you” to those who have fought for their country, but also reflects a desire by the industry as a whole to give back. Before this publication went to press, over 150 carwashes across the country signed up to participate.

Longtime friend Bob Ruhe, who serves as the Grace for Vets Project Manager, said “Mike is extremely passionate about the program. This year a significant effort was made in that all United States governors, senators, congress men and women, and even celebrities were contacted. This effort has been huge. Grace For Vets speaks on behalf of the entire carwash industry.”

Professional Carwashing & Detailing recently spoke to Mountz to find out how the program originated and how the effort that goes

into making Mountz's dream of 1 million free car washes given on Veterans Day to vets a reality.

PC&D: How did you get started in the car washing industry?

Mountz: It was 1984. I had just bought a very small facility in Ephrata that employed three people. I really just wanted to start a business and it happened to be in the car wash industry.

PC&D: How has the car washing industry evolved over the past 25 years?

Mountz: I believe it has risen to a higher level of professionalism. Other businesses have emerged, such as "quick lubes." Wash technology has improved. Websites have increased communications. Women are more involved. And I would say that 70 percent of our customers today are women. It's looked upon favorably as an employment opportunity. We employ close to 500 people now and there are people here with 25 years of experience.

PC&D: How did Grace For Vets get started?

Mountz: I really felt a calling to it. I'm humbled by everything our service personnel have given for this country and it's just remarkable to me that people sacrifice years of their lives. My participation was very small, but I got to witness the suffering of men and women serving our country when I was hospitalized in Valley Forge. And just witnessing people there missing arms and legs really drove the message home.

PC&D: A lot of car washes are involved in the program. From what you have seen, would you say that the carwashing industry is an altruistic one?

Mountz: I would. It's a close-knit group of people. Carwash operators seem to always come together and rally for a good cause. And this is a great cause. It just makes sense for everybody. It makes sense for the vets and it makes sense for the participating car washes, as a great opportunity for community involvement. It's a "win-win" across the board.

PC&D: How has the program evolved over the years?

Mountz: It has really grown and had a big snowball effect. This year has seen a much greater response. And each year we keep improving the website. Now you can go to the website to see participating car washes. We are currently working on a complete list of all car washes who have participated across the country in the past years. It's amazing how that list is growing and continues to grow.

PC&D: How much work goes into the Grace For Vets, both before and after Veteran Day?

Mountz: Each year we staff both a full-time position and several part-time positions. It takes a minimum of 40 hours a week for all personnel involved months prior to the national event. They are making phone calls, updating the website, keeping the participants page updated, and communicating via email. We contact VFW posts, radio and TV stations and newspapers, who usually provide us free press. We also get a lot of supportive and "thank you" emails we read and respond to. On the local level, a participating car wash will spend only 5 to 10 hours, due to the ready-to-use marketing materials Grace For Vets provides.

It is very important to me that Cloister and myself don't get credit for Grace for Vets. I shouldn't get any more credit than the carwash

that gives away just two carwashes on Veterans Day. I really don't want to take any glory away from anyone who participates. It's really all about the vets and the industry.

PC&D: The day must be an emotional one for you?

Mountz: Bring tissues if you ever go to a wash participating on Veterans Day. It is just very emotional. When I see Grace For Vets mentioned on a website, by a company or the International Car Washing Association, I even get choked up. It is just remarkable.