

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Susan Junker: An industrious woman making an incredible mark in Bandera County

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The Bandera Prophet

It's easy to sit back, relax and simply enjoy the serene Hill Country, especially Bandera County. But this is far from the path Susan Junker has chosen for herself. With military experience, nonprofit management, speechwriting, public speaking, serving on various boards, and a run for county judge under her belt (to only name a few), there isn't much the American Legion commander hasn't attempted and accomplished with great success.

Growing up in the central Illinois town of Peoria, Junker was familiar with the rural countryside from a young age. She reminisced about growing up surrounded by various animals like cattle, horses and chickens, with 80 acres of woods to get lost in. A strong work ethic was instilled early in her childhood, and despite growing up with all sisters, Junker explained how her parents created a very gender-neutral environment, with chores open to anyone. She became familiar with manual, laborious tasks, including mixing concrete and motor mechanics.

Junker said her experience with nonprofits and charitable work began early on. Growing up, her family members set an example by serving on school boards, parent-teacher associations, veteran organizations and church organizations. She was taught to have "a responsibility by contributing to the community," she said, specifically mentioning being with World War I and II veterans who "who continued serving in their community," even after the wars.

Junker first got involved in the military when she enrolled in ROTC at the University of Illinois. After graduating, she served in the military for 24 years, doing tasks like speechwriting, presentations and leading thousand-people logistics units.

She “wasn’t afraid of work or risk,” she said, and learned to be industrious in her pursuits. Her military career propelled Junker around the world, including South Korea, the Pentagon, and other locations stateside.

After retiring from the military, Junker went on to work at other large, well-known establishments, including Lockheed Martin and Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., which later brought her to San Antonio. She contrasted how different life was living in Washington D.C., compared to Bandera, emphasizing how “you might not talk to anyone all day after running errands [in Washington D.C.]” As any local knows, that is not the case in Bandera.

When Lockheed Martin downsized their operations, Junker and her husband had a decision to make. Determined to not return to Washington D.C., they chose to make Bandera their home 11 years ago, and have resided here ever since. Junker expanded her knowledge, taking nonprofit management courses in San Antonio. The instillation of supporting veterans from a young age, coupled with Junker’s own military experience, equipped her well for the first project she pursued post-“retirement”.

In 2014, Junker noticed an issue with the Bandera County Veteran Service Officer. She said this was her “first attempt to figure out local government,” and she was very successful. The position was eventually rewritten, and the new VSO now brings in \$45 million for veterans annually.

One of Junker’s major undertakings is the Bandera American Legion Post 157. A post of one of America’s largest veteran-supporting organizations, she saw an opportunity to grow awareness surrounding the organization.

Beginning in 2013, she began leading the public relations efforts for the Legion, creating an award-winning website and publications. She has

now been commander of the Post since 2020. Legion Vice Commander Rick Olivarez said he met Junker when he joined the Post in 2022.

“[She] has been instrumental with building the local chapter as a leader in supporting and promoting Bandera County interests and numerous Veterans Programs,” Olivarez said.

Dr. Theresa Schultz, another member of the Post, said she joined the the day she met Junker, adding that she is not only a friend but a mentor.

Despite Covid shutting down much of the country in early- to mid-2020, Junker (once again) saw this as an opportunity to do something positive.

The Post became the meeting location for groups unable to meet elsewhere. These groups included the Bandera County Retired Teachers, Bikers Against Child Abuse, the Bandera Wranglers and others. Some of these groups continue to meet and even host their events there.

One of the programs Junker has introduced with the Bandera American Legion is Veterans in the Classroom. Since 2016, this program has involved five to seven veterans going into classrooms in Bandera ISD and doing hands on activities with the kids once a year. One year, the veterans went to the middle school, and were interviewed by the students. Junker fondly recalled when the well-known (not for their appetizing taste) MREs were brought in, and the school’s senior staff gave them a try.

Bandera ISD Superintendent Gary Bitzkie said her “dedication to community engagement is truly commendable,” adding, “her unwavering commitment to various initiatives, including leading [Bandera] schools on Veterans Day and participating in district committees, demonstrates her invaluable role in promoting unity and progress within our community.”

Junker said the Post is presently wrapping up a 10-year process of improvements to the building. Looking towards the future, Junker said she would like to see “long term financial footing [for the Legion], no matter what happens.”

She also emphasized the importance of the Bandera American Legion maintaining its various veterans programs.

More of Junker's contributions to the society include her work with the Frontier Times Museum. Junker served on the museum Board of Directors from 2017 to 2019. During that time, additional funding sources for the museum were secured, bringing in \$5,000 alone in the first six months of Junker's involvement. Rebecca Norton, Frontier Times Museum executive director, worked closely with Junker. Norton said Junker was "very active in making sure the museum was financially secure, working closely with [her] on grants and funding opportunities," adding, "Bandera is fortunate to have a woman with [Junker's] military experience and professional knowledge, who is so active in the community."

Junker presently serves as the Bandera County blood drive coordinator, and has done so since 2020, recently bringing the option of platelet donations to the residents of Bandera. She has also served on the Bandera County Historical Commission since 2021, initiating their oral history program. In 2022, Junker ran for Bandera County Judge. Although unsuccessful in winning the election, Junker said she thoroughly enjoyed meeting the citizens of Bandera, and acquired a wealth of new information during the process.

"Failure is just attempt number one," she said.

Of her many years of service, Junker said one of her primary goals is continuous improvement and community service.

"The most important part is paying it forward," Junker said. "Setting the example of a work ethic, being confident and building confidence in others."