

Col. John Devillier | Military Leadership Award

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Putting Partnership at The Heart of Change

As commander of the 88th Air Base Wing at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Col. John Devillier oversees 27,000 military and civilian personnel on the 4,000-acre installation near Dayton, Ohio. And somehow he has found time to develop mutually beneficial collaborations between Wright-Patterson and the surrounding community. His effort serves as a model for partnership across the country. America's Defense Communities magazine asked Devillier why these partnerships are so important and what he and his team have done to form and cultivate them.

ADC: You stood up a distinct Air Force Public-Private Partnership office at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. What does that accomplish that couldn't be done before?

COL. DEVILLIER: First, I have to provide a shout out to my predecessor, who planted the seed for the partnership office at Wright-Patterson. We took that seed and have nurtured the concept to identify ideas for exploration within the realm of both public and private partnership opportunities. These opportunities have allowed us to offset costs in shared collaborative areas such as training and to improve revenue streams in service areas such as recreation or medical services. As I have told the partnership team, it is OK to not be successful with each partnership endeavor; however, the more endeavors we undertake, the better chances of finding a good fit between Wright-Patterson and our Miami Valley partners. We see our partnership office as a capital investment.

ADC: You've spearheaded several initiatives to benefit the community, such as an internship fair, government resume workshops, allowing students to use the base's fire training facilities; and partnering with the VA to treat veterans on base through the Buckeye Health Consortium. What are you proud of?

COL. DEVILLIER: Given the outstanding relationship Wright-Patterson has with the Miami Valley, brainstorming possible partnership ideas is fairly straight forward. We have a number of natural ties to the local community through organizations such as the Dayton Development Coalition and our relationships with local colleges, universities and hospitals. What we needed to do was communicate to the local community that we're looking for mutually beneficial partnerships — once the word got out, ideas began to flow from our off-base partners and internally from Wright-Patterson itself.

We're really excited about the recently formed Dayton Region Military Collaborative under the leadership of the Dayton Development Coalition to further advance partnership possibilities. With regard to being proud of a particular partnership, each one is special as it meets a need for both the installation and for our local community partners. Some, such as the Buckeye Health Consortium, have more visibility, yet each of our partnership initiatives fills a need between us and our Miami Valley community partners.

ADC: What has Dayton done specifically to support the base or add to morale?

COL. DEVILLIER: I've never seen such a level of community support in my 23 years of service in the Air Force. From the Hometown Heroes program to our routine interactions with city mayors and managers to our partnering with local colleges and universities, the Miami Valley supports Wright-Patterson. I often joke that if you have two airmen rubbing sticks together at Wright-Patterson someone from the local community will be there to cheer them on – it is that special of a relationship!

ADC: You clearly make it a priority to provide recreational and educational opportunities for Air Force personnel on the base—examples include the USO Center and the base's partnership with Wright State University to offer free graduate school tuition to airmen.

COL. DEVILLIER: Given Wright-Patterson's moniker as the "Center of Innovation" in the United States Air Force, providing developmental opportunities for our workforce is a top priority. Thus, we continually assess our relationship with local colleges and universities, not only to develop our internal workforce, but to also provide an avenue for local graduates to serve our nation as Wright-Patterson leads the way in preparing America's Air Force for the challenges of the future. Our recent addition of the USO on Wright-Patterson will provide another mechanism to not only enhance quality of life for Airmen but to further our social ties with the Miami Valley.

ADC: Do you and your family enjoy the Dayton area?

COL. DEVILLIER: My family and I have truly enjoyed our time in the Miami Valley. The Midwestern values and friendly demeanor of the citizens of the Miami Valley has been second to none. The area is centrally located to major metropolitan areas and provides an exceptional quality of life. There is a reason Air Force Times ranked Wright-Patterson as the number one stateside installation to be stationed at, and my family and I have been blessed to experience this positive quality of life first hand over the past two years.

ADC: When you pass the baton, what will be your advice?

COL. DEVILLIER: My advice to the incoming commander is: do not let the barriers of doing something different stand in the way. Given the fiscal challenges we all face, there is great benefit for looking to partner and rather than say “no, because,” find a way to say “yes, if.”

ADC: You’ve said, “One person can change a climate – be that person.”

COL. DEVILLIER: This saying stems from my personal desire to see everyone treated with dignity, honor and respect. We spend a large portion of our day with our “work family,” and my experience has shown me that if you treat people well, they will move mountains for you. Each one of us, no matter our given role in an organization, plays an important part in the overall team’s success, and one person can set the example in an organization, so I challenge everyone to be that person.

ADC: What have you learned professionally and personally from this role?

COL. DEVILLIER: Personally, my role has given me a greater appreciation for the breadth of missions we have here at Wright-Patterson, supporting our nation and the importance of having a strong and positive collaboration with our surrounding communities in the Miami Valley. Working together, we can not only improve the quality of life for our airmen, we can find collaborative methods to work together and solve challenges. Ultimately, don’t be afraid to question the status quo.

Col. John Devillier has been recognized with ADC’s 2016 Military Leadership Award.
