



Game Master Dave



David VanderWerf

"I've taught games my whole life," David VanderWerf says.

In grade school, when friends would get board games, they'd approach VanderWerf, now a member of Long Island Merged, NY Branch 6000, and ask, "Can you learn and then teach us?"

A lover of military history and strategy, the Army and Army National Guard veteran attended his first gaming event, held at West Point, in his late teens. That interest has translated into becoming an expert on games such as Dungeons & Dragons, Magic: The Gathering, Pokémon and Warhammer 40,000.

VanderWerf, who also goes by the moniker "Game Master Dave," has continued his hobby with his wife, Ginger, by putting on events in New York and New Jersey for fellow game enthusiasts and newcomers alike.

These experiences include library events as well as larger gaming conventions, such as Long Island Retro Gaming Expo and Long Island Tabletop Gaming Expo, where the VanderWerfs teach three to 15 board games to about 400 people over the course of a weekend for the events. The conventions usually draw between 500 and 2,000 people.

As participants walk by, "We're like,

'Hey! Play this game!' " VanderWerf said. "People will say they don't know how [and we tell them], 'That's OK! We can teach you how to play.'

"They go crazy and love it," he added. "The reaction was, 'Whoa! This was awesome!'"

The introductory games he teaches are Quoridor, Ticket to Ride, Carcassonne and Catan. "We call them gateway games," VanderWerf said.

The carrier says he and Ginger have grasped onto "the community, the strategy, the laughter...it's great fun."

Tabletop board games have experienced a surge in popularity in recent years, with some people calling it the "golden age" of gaming. The exploding board game industry is expected to reach a value of \$12 billion by 2023.

Now in his fifth year as a carrier, VanderWerf serves as Customer Connect coordinator, an on-the-job instructor and a shop steward. Prior to joining the Postal Service, VanderWerf ran a board game store on Long Island, which had been a lifelong dream of his. "I was an entrepreneur and small-business owner," he says. He was fascinated by the prospect of whether someone would buy a game if he was able to teach them to play.

"When I had the game store, someone would walk in and ask, 'What is

this?'" VanderWerf said. He would teach them Quoridor in one minute. "Once you teach someone one of these cool board games, you just watch them get into it and enjoy it," the carrier said.

The VanderWerfs put on events each week in the store, including tournaments for Magic: The Gathering, Dungeons & Dragons or War Machine that brought out about 50 regular customers.

During that period, he'd attend five to six large gaming expositions a year as a patron, but he would go to others as a vendor to sell games and other products. While doing so, "I had built



VanderWerf teaches board games at gaming events.

some relationships with librarians,” he said. That led to the partnership with his local library, where he would hold a few events each month.

While he doesn’t have the business anymore, he still is friendly with those in the industry on Long Island and sends them business when he can. He and Ginger also usually host a monthly game night at their home with friends.

VanderWerf loves the fact that anyone can get into gaming. “I play games with retired people and kids,” he says. “Anybody at any age can play.” The carrier added that after he taught his mother Dominion, she won every game against him.

He has been determined not to let the COVID-19 pandemic stop his gaming. The conventions have been postponed or canceled and all the stores on Long Island have closed for now, so VanderWerf has moved the fun online.

The carrier has been running events with a library on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform. He and Ginger will demonstrate a game to the attendees and then they all play. The events draw as many as 25 people.

When it helps, he embraces technology. “My personal gaming uses multiple platforms: Steam, Boardgame Arena and Tabletop Simulator,” VanderWerf said, adding, “I made a Discord channel to chat. It’s like Skype, but with a couple of other bells and whistles.”

One conference he participates in, Long Island Tabletop, moved entirely online for this year and hosted a virtual event in April. It had 20 events

in Zoom rooms, and also streamed on Twitch and YouTube.

A few other libraries have contacted VanderWerf as well, hoping that he and Ginger would help with a mini Comic-Con-type event for 200 people by providing instruction for Dungeons & Dragons. In addition, “some libraries have asked us to do kids’ events, ages 6 to 16,” he said.

Knowing thousands of games, you would think it would be tough to choose a favorite, but for VanderWerf there is a clear-cut choice.

“My favorite game of all time is Advanced Squad Leader, because the rule book is something like 200 pages,” he says. “It takes two hours to do squad-level combat in World War II.”

There aren’t a lot of people who know how to play that particular game, VanderWerf says with a laugh, but he enjoys it when he does.

“It’s very tactical, because you’re refighting historical battles,” he said. “Video games do it much better, but I like the strategy of the board.”

VanderWerf runs his own website, gamemastergames.com, where he lists upcoming events and writes a blog. He says he has a personal email chain of about 50 people to whom he sends regular game invitations. He plays about four nights a week online.

The past few years, he also has tracked what games he plays at boardgamegeek.com. Games he’s liked recently include 7 Wonders, which he’s now played often, and Wingspan. “It’s a gorgeous game,” VanderWerf said. “You can learn a lot about birds.”

He has invited at least half a dozen

co-workers to his personal online events. None has come yet, but he holds out hope.

“Most people are resistant. It’s hard to get a non-gamer out of their comfort zone,” he said. “Once you do, they love it.”

He’s humbled when people tell him that they have made friends because of his store or events. The carrier likes seeing connections happen, especially when people exchange information and form a new event. “I enjoy watching those interactions. It spreads community,” VanderWerf said. “The game becomes the tool to spending time with friends.”

His biggest success story was when “a divorced father, looking for something to do with his sons on a Friday night, took a chance and walked into my store,” he said. “Two years later, they had shared experiences, had learned many new things, stored away memories of good times and had made dozens of good friends. This is what gaming can do for a person. That is what community can do for a group of individuals. We all have a desire to be near one another and have fun. Tabletop games are a great choice of entertainment and learning.”

But the part that brings VanderWerf the most joy is teaching. “Teaching games is my life’s passion,” he says. “There’s something inside of me that loves to break down the rulebook.”

It’s great to help see people through the process, he explained by recounting what he tells them: “This is how you get toward your victory. Now let’s play.” **PR**