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HEROES AT HOME:

Honoring our Nation's Veterans

Kayla Vasilko (*English Writing*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Kayla Vasilko is a senior in English Writing and Writing for New Media with minors in Creative Writing and Spanish at Purdue University Northwest. Throughout her academic career, she has striven to make a positive impact in the world with her writing by authoring grants and various mediums for community organizations such as the Independent Cat Society, Laini Fluellen Charities, and the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court. One of her proudest accomplishments is the grant that enabled her to start a remembrance garden at Gabis Arboretum. In this article, she describes her experience working with veterans and veteran organizations to raise awareness for the acts of our nation's heroes.

INTRODUCTION

Our nation's veterans are not only the driving force of protection for our country, but they are also the building blocks of our communities. They are known for being some of the most innovative citizens, building up successful community organizations and founding outlets of support for other veterans. But they still need the support of the community. There are many ways to provide this, but the most important thing is to first preserve their unique stories and promote an understanding of their needs.

When my close friend, Diana Foster, lost her husband, I attended the funeral and learned that her husband, Bill, was not only an invaluable driving force of the Independent Cat Society community organization, but he was also a veteran mentor for the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court (PCVTC) with a Purple Heart, a National Defense medal, Vietnam Service medal, and many other honors to his name. Not only was I surprised by the fact that I had previously only known a fraction of this, but I was also awed by the incredible things this

veteran did to serve others in his community long after his service with the military was done. His efforts reminded me of my grandfather, Steve Vukusic, a retired lieutenant colonel who worked tirelessly to run multiple community organizations and projects. Bill and Steve are pictured in Figures 1 and 2 respectively.

Recognizing how veterans work to make our country a better place, even on the community level, is what drove me to pursue a service-learning project with many objectives to be completed over the course of a year. The main goal was to shed light on the needs of veterans in our country by sharing their stories, and in turn work to fill their needs. To do this, I connected with the PCVTC, the veterans organization where Bill volunteered for many years, and wrote a service-learning grant for their organization. I also interviewed the veterans who volunteered with the organization, and through their guidance, I connected with more veterans and veteran support organizations to compile a written history of veterans and community impact. The result was a myriad of hands-on work and an online forum called Dog Tags, which has since linked with the sites of veteran support

Figure 1. Bill Foster in Vietnam.

Figure 2. Steve Vukusic in service.

organizations across the country. This reflection details the multiple facets of this service-learning journey.

COMMUNITY NEED

There are currently 17.42 *million* veterans living in America today (Statista, n.d.). These heroes dedicated their service in World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, leaving home and giving up the comforts of stability, family, and guaranteed safety to ensure that America remains a stable and safe place for individuals and families to call home; yet upon returning home themselves, our nation's veterans have had to face immense hardships. About 40,000 veterans are without shelter in the United States on any given night; some of the leading causes of veteran homelessness include PTSD, social isolation, unemployment, and substance abuse (Hernandez & Hernandez, 2020). This is why programs such as the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court, designed to support our nation's veterans, are so important for our community.

Throughout the project, my goals developed into three stages: to work with the Treatment Court to ensure they are able to provide as much veteran support as possible; go out into the virtual field to record veterans' stories; and publish that history to provide a clearer picture of who our country's veterans are, what they need, and how we can help them.

DESCRIPTION

The Porter County Veterans Treatment Court started out as a pilot program before becoming a certified problem-solving court as a response to the increase in justice-involved veterans in Porter County, Indiana. The program was initiated by a deputy prosecutor and several defense attorneys who came together to create plans to serve justice-involved veterans. The plans often involved the VA and other organizations that could provide services ("PCVTC," n.d.).

The program's founding judge, the Honorable Julia Jent, was a veteran herself. After ensuring court orders were in alignment with the prosecutor and attorneys' plans, she created a planning committee to help formalize the need for a Veterans Treatment Court program, which helped coordinate support for the veterans and their families, and increased community awareness regarding veterans' needs. One year later on September 11, 2019, the PCVTC became a certified problem-solving court program ("PCVTC," n.d.).

Now under the leadership of the Honorable Michael Drenth, the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court engages justice-involved veterans in services that provide a balance of support and accountability while also promoting community safety. The PCVTC works to achieve the goals of:

- Promoting public safety by reducing recidivism.
- Achieving positive participant outcomes.
- Facilitating improved quality of life for Veterans Treatment Court participants.
- Reducing court- and corrections-related costs through administrative efficiencies.

These goals are achieved through assessment-driven case management, referrals to VA and local providers for mental health services and substance abuse treatment, medication management services, options for recovery safe housing, cognitive-behavioral programs designed to improve prosocial thinking, and the development of prosocial opportunities for participants to engage in positive ways within their community (“PCVTC,” n.d.). Some of the 2020 PCVTC team members are pictured in Figure 3. The demographic of the community served is represented by the following percentages:

- 96% men/4% women
- 96% white/4% African American
- Ages: 26–30/19%, 31–35/31%, 36–40/12%, 41–45/15%, 46–50/4%, 51–55/8%, 56–60/8%, 66 and above/3%
- Education: HSE/12%, HS Grad/60%, College/20%, Vocational Ed Program/8%

- Employment: Employed/91%, Disabled/5%, Retired/4%

Research has proven that a frequency of four rewards to one punisher is associated with positive behavioral change. Thus, the program incentivizes desired behaviors and achievement with positive reinforcement, utilizing a variety of intangible and tangible reinforcement including social praise, letters and certificates of acknowledgement, gift cards, and changes in supervision levels (“PCVTC,” n.d.). Furthermore, recovery support is essential for many veterans. Participants frequently experience financial difficulty and purchasing recovery support materials is something they are too often unable to do.

Through training, the PCVTC ensures that mentors in their program remain up-to-date about evidence-based practices regarding their work with justice-involved veterans so that they are equipped with the tools and strategies shown through research to be most helpful to the veterans they work with. PCVTC mentors are veterans themselves who dedicate their time to support justice-involved veterans in need (“PCVTC,” n.d.).

I learned about the PCVTC after hearing Bill Foster’s story and knew I wanted to connect with them to launch my project. After reaching out, I was able to work with organization representative Tammy O’Neill. She was

Figure 3. Members of the PCVTC team, as shown in Valpo.Life.

extremely supportive of the full scope of initiatives with the project; Tammy mentored me as I learned about the PCVTC as an organization, explored the importance of the existence of diverse veteran community organizations, and came to broadly understand veterans' needs in the community. After much exploration under this guidance, I learned the specific needs of the PCVTC and wrote a grant to help with the organization's efforts. As I wrote the grant through the Purdue University Service-Learning Grant Competition, I connected my PNW student organization Actively Moving Forward (AMF) with the PCVTC's needs. The grant was awarded for \$1,500, and the funds were used to purchase materials in three categories: recovery support materials, mentor training, and treatment incentives. All the while, AMF members promoted veterans' stories by sharing about the project initiatives with Wreaths Across America, Folds of Honor, and American Veterans for Equal Rights.

Though this project took place throughout the time of the pandemic, we did not let that stop us from doing the work that needed to be done. Ms. O'Neill and I were able to collaborate remotely; I was able to learn the workings of the PCVTC organization and understand the needs of the community served via Zoom. She helped connect me with research on what America's veterans face upon returning home, and shared that in the PCVTC program, veterans in need are paired with veteran mentors, counseling services, and support material. Since my project was inspired by Bill Foster, who mentored for the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court, my research and community work naturally started there. It was to Tammy's credit that I connected with Bob Carnagey, a veteran mentor at the PCVTC, for remote interviews. His interviews led to connections with Wreaths Across America, Folds of Honor, South-shore Friends of Veterans, the Army Women's Foundation, and the Jewish War Veterans of the United States, totaling 25 interviews at the time of this writing. Three interviews were conducted with the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court, followed by months of working one-on-one with the organization for the other project objectives.

During two interviews, PCVTC veteran mentor Bob Carnagey stated: "People don't understand the meaning of the word veteran. Each one is special, yet connected. No matter what branch they serve, each veteran had to raise their right hand and pledge their life to this country. That pledge is what connects us all." His words became a guiding force behind my project; Bob's kind personality shines out in Figure 4. Tammy set the precedent for

Figure 4. Bob Carnagey at an annual veteran fundraiser.

the virtual researching and interviewing I needed to do to complete my goals with the project as she explained how the PCVTC was pivoting to offer virtual support for clients and made my initial veteran connections possible.

After I authored the grant, we worked together to obtain the list of materials that would best serve the PCVTC's veterans to ensure the most productive usage of the funding. I spoke multiple times with veteran mentors like Bob Carnagey to understand how the PCVTC's mentor program worked as I shaped the larger narrative for my project. I furthered the project initiatives by educating members of AMF about veteran needs at every step of the way. As AMF is an organization dedicated to helping the community through bereavement with remembrance efforts, its existing mission tied closely with the project. As a result, the organization and I have created plans for veteran awareness events virtually and on campus.

The PCVTC regularly seeks undergraduate students as interns to engage one on one with veterans in need. Interns are able to assist with participants in case management by sitting in on counseling services, develop

special projects for participants such as interactive motivational enhancement boards, and attend Veterans Treatment Court sessions by working in tandem with veteran mentors. The PCVTC coordinator also partners with other team members of the program to educate the community about veteran needs (“PCVTC,” n.d.).

The partnership that occurred with my project was unique, however, and something that was created as my project narrative expanded and I became more aware of veteran needs and the opportunities available to meet them.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The Porter County Veterans Treatment Court has served 166 veterans since its opening and worked with two long-term student interns and five short-term student interns. Because of this partnership and the resulting service-learning grant, the program will now have increased capacity to incentivize prosocial behavioral choices and achievement to, in turn, increase repetition of the desired behavioral choices and reduce the likelihood of reoffense. From the funding awarded, the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court was supplied with 114 new items in the listed categories; in turn, they were able to replenish items such as hygiene products, food, clothing, and counseling curriculum. More participants will now be provided with the recovery support materials that they need. As a whole, this allows the PCVTC to continue to employ the methods that research has shown is effective in helping individuals dealing with the challenges cited above, thus making the efforts a success. Furthermore, the expanded partnership with the student organization Actively Moving Forward (see Figure 5) has concretely increased overall awareness for the veteran community and facilitated long-term collaboration between the PCVTC and Purdue University Northwest.

Figure 5. AMF organization logo.

Though the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court works with student interns, many interns volunteer for a short term. This makes building a rapport with PCVTC coordinators or creating strong relationships with PCVTC clients difficult. Partnering regularly with Actively Moving Forward and, by extension, the PNW community could help build a stronger sense of routine and comradery.

During this time, engagement is even more challenging for the PCVTC because of COVID-19 restrictions. Emotional trauma is diverse and it is widespread on a normal basis. But with the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world is facing loss in even greater horrific variance. Individuals are enduring the loss of employment, security, certainty, and multiple different freedoms and comforts. Their self-concepts are being completely altered. They are facing the rapid loss of friends, peers, and family members, and many are unable to carry out the normal rituals to honor those losses and grieve due to the risk of further spreading the pandemic (Singh, 2020). Porter County Veterans Treatment Court clients face challenges in terms of values and beliefs such as antisocial thinking, in transportation, housing, finances, trauma from deployments, lack of support networks, and resistance to care every day, but having to deal with these new restrictions has caused an even larger barrier. The most challenging part of the work is the fact that currently, case management and treatment services are being conducted virtually; all of my interaction within the organization was via video, email, and phone. This, combined with the fact that the patients have to receive 75% of services from the organization remotely in present time as well, created difficulties for the patients, organization operators, and me. This is why spreading awareness and taking action is even more crucial right now.

The PCVTC program will continue to be maintained by the cooperation of the organization staff and coordinators. As interns leave, the team will continue outreach to new volunteers, and maintain all projects, treatments, and activities through case management.

To illustrate the impact of our nation's veterans and the importance of this work to help fulfill their needs, I interviewed several veterans. In one of our interviews, Vietnam veteran Bob Carnagey told me about how he earned a Bronze Star. In 1967, he got drafted. He was assigned to be a typist after basic training and was sent to the heart of Vietnam. In his role, Bob had access to a jeep, something not all soldiers had. When he went into the enlisted men's club, he expected the other men would want a ride, though he was not expecting to hear

the request they actually made. As would become the Sunday routine, Bob and his group piled into his jeep and went to a nearby orphanage run by a woman named “Ms. Thank You.” He would park right in front, honk his horn, and over 100 children would run out to greet them. Bob and his friends would rush through the gate and play with the children. Through letters he wrote home, Bob was able to organize donation drives to provide clothing for the children. He also worked with a sergeant in his unit to bring pallets of food to the orphanage so that the children did not have to eat only rice three times a day. It was these efforts that earned Mr. Carnagey a Bronze Star, and these experiences that inspired him to stay involved long after serving. After returning home, Bob helped raise over \$250,000 for Folds of Honor, an organization that supports children who have lost parents in the military. He also started his own organization, called Southshore Friends of Veterans, and remains a mentor for the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court.

Hearing Bob’s story supercharged my efforts with the PCVTC and energy for the project overall. As a mentor, Bob told me the immense difference the items purchased with the grant were going to make in the lives of the veterans he and the other mentors were working with; he said many veterans were struggling even more during the pandemic. He encouraged me to connect with as many support organizations as possible and compile a list of diverse stories.

Bob also spoke about the Patriot Guard Riders, and I connected with Navy veteran member Mike Marcum, shown in Figure 6, as the project continued. He shared how his time serving taught him to appreciate everything that we have in America, such as cold drinking water and shelter with windows and doors. Mike became involved with the Patriot Guard after learning about them at a service for a soldier who was killed in action. He joined their efforts that very day; Mike shared with me how much pride he takes in standing for the fallen in any weather and at any time.

Mike’s story motivated me to stay dedicated to this project. By recording veterans’ stories, completing research about veterans’ needs, and writing a grant for some of those needs, I wanted to create multiple layers of awareness so that community members would have as many opportunities as possible to feel a connection to these needs, just as Mike did at the fallen hero’s service, and be inspired to take action for the same cause.

Compiling and sharing the stories collected for this project greatly impacts the community just as much as

Figure 6. Mike Marcum in service.

the hands-on work with the PCVTC. I published ten stories collected from my interviews, which resulted in an online forum called dogtagshonoringournationsveterans.wordpress.com; it has been linked with the Library of Congress’s Veterans History Project Archive, Jewish War Veterans, and the Army Women’s Foundation; a portion of the site is shown in Figure 7. This work sheds light on the wonderful organizations included and illustrates real accounts of what these heroes do to protect all people. It has the power to connect individuals and inspire greater change.

STUDENT-AUTHOR IMPACT

The multifaceted project was an incredible learning experience for me. It was beyond encouraging to see how well all the moving parts ended up fitting together. Creating awareness for the heroic acts of our nation’s veterans while writing a grant for and working with the PCVTC allowed me to draw on facts from my larger veteran research to include in the grant for the

Figure 7. Dog Tags site.

organization, and in turn created a more comprehensive online forum. I was able to expand on the skills in grant writing, marketing, and content design that I have polished while pursuing my degree in English Writing and Writing for New Media, and build a larger conceptual picture of the veteran community I was writing about by working in that community firsthand.

One of my biggest takeaways from the experience is learning about the power of the bond that veterans share with one another. Many veterans dealing with different struggles were able to work through the challenges that they faced because of the PCVTC's mentor program. Because the mentors in the program are also veterans, they have a deeper understanding of what each struggling veteran is going through and can walk beside them as they navigate through their needs. The special bond that connects all veterans that Mr. Carnegie referenced in our interview is something that I have striven to emphasize in all my resulting work on this project.

Another important realization that this experience brought was in terms of difficulty; it showed me how easy it is to make a difference in the community. The hardest part is simply taking the first step, creating initiative, and the rest is a meaningful and eye-opening experience that will make just as much of a positive difference for you.

What I learned from the interviews I conducted and the time I spent working with the PCVTC has taught me invaluable lessons about the importance of prioritizing loyalty, honoring commitment, identifying goals, and fighting for what you think is important. Currently, I have plans to work with the PCVTC to organize a veteran platform event at Purdue University Northwest so that we can continue to spread these important messages and share the stories of our nation's heroes. For this platform, I will work with Actively Moving Forward to host Share a Story events, blending PCVTC stories and the collective stories of the forum. At the events, we will invite different veterans from the Porter

County Veterans Treatment Court to speak to students about their experiences serving abroad and in the community. The event can be conducted virtually and in person, which will allow us to get started right away.

What I have observed from this project, from veterans and specifically the PCVTC, has opened my eyes to the true definition of getting involved and making a difference. Regardless of where my professional future takes me, I know that using my writing to make a positive difference for organizations and communities in need will always be my focus.

CONCLUSION

To other students looking to get involved with the Porter County Veterans Treatment Court, or community partner work in general, I would encourage them to keep asking the community partner how they can get more involved with the organization and take the project to the next level. Additionally, I would encourage them not to be afraid to be creative, and come to the community partner with ideas of their own along with a plan to implement them. These community organizations serve important populations in need, and even just demonstrating the desire to help serve those populations goes a long way in making a positive impact.

Just as we will always need brave, selfless individuals who sacrifice a part of their lives to protect our country, the need to offer support and create awareness for the care of our nation's veterans will always exist. Therefore, this project will never really be done. Writing this article serves a small part in calling more light to the topic, but it will take many more students, groups, and universities to ensure these needs are met. We all need to

come together as the country they have defended, and this time, unite for them.

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