

Female veterans struggle to reintegrate into civilian life

Submitted by [admin](#) on July 15, 2011 – 4:55 pm



Suzanne Uncapher, U.S. Navy veteran. (photo by Ashley Klann)

By Ashley Klann
Clark University

Coffee's brewing in the kitchen, and a colorful clipping from a Strawberry Shortcake coloring book adorns the fridge. Past the living room full of well-stocked bookcases and comfy sofas is an office with computers. If this sounds like home, it's because to a group of female veterans struggling to reintegrate into the civilian world they left, it is.

Behind the double doors of Veterans Inc. at 6 Sheridan Street lies a strong community and a wealth of life-changing prospects for the residents who live there. The program started in 1991 and has provided housing, childcare, counseling, health and wellness services, job training and education opportunities for female veterans and their children.

While an all-female veteran shelter may sound unique, part of that is owed to the fact that women in the military were uncommon until recently and are still fighting for equal representation in the armed forces.

Fifty-year-old Suzanne Uncapher has been a pioneer in many ways. She served in the U.S. Navy for 20 years, beginning in 1978 – a time when women were struggling to earn recognition in many fields, including the military.

“When I served, there were few women in the service. None of them were on submarines, flying, or serving as pilots. They were mainly kept to desk jobs at the time,” Uncapher said. “Women didn’t even make up 10 percent in the military [at that time]. We had to blaze the trail. Some men didn’t want women in the military, and there were a lot of training sessions about coexistence and sexual harassment. It was a learning curve for everyone involved.”

Change comes slow. Only in 2010 did the Navy update its policy to allow women to serve aboard submarines.

Uncapher was also one of the first residents at Veterans Inc. and has witnessed the success of many of her peers since.

“It was new, and we were the first ones here. I’m a senior member, and not because of my age,” she says with a laugh. “There are a lot of hardship stories here, and I’ve seen them progress.”

Veterans Inc. has helped veterans with varying degrees of post-combat struggle. Suzanne Uncapher’s 20 years in the Navy revolved around military law. She worked for the Judge Advocate General’s Corps, helped people with legal assistance, prepped squadrons before sending them out, and helped families.

“A lot of what I did was basically like social work. You let them know you’re there for them,” she said.

After spending two decades working in the legal field in various places and programs from Guam to Alabama, Uncapher’s life faced a dramatic change.

“I’ve done so much. Twenty years went by fast,” she says.

After leaving the service, Uncapher spent time with her son who was stationed in Florida. While she enjoyed being with him and his family, she knew she needed to relocate to her home.

“I wanted to come back to Massachusetts. I was in a bad relationship. I had no job and no money. I knew if I could just get there, I’d be OK,” she says.

Uncapher was desperate to escape her situation and rejoin with her mother and the community she left in Massachusetts, but the transition wasn’t easy.

“Coming home was difficult. I didn’t think it would be, but it was,” she says. “You’re used to everyone being there all the time, and then you’re in the civilian world again. You miss the camaraderie in the military sector. It was hard fitting back in. I was gone for 20 years.”

During that period, people move, change and make new connections. Uncapher found herself searching for stability.

“Where do you really fit in? Veterans are vulnerable in that sense,” she says.

Uncapher called Veteran’s Inc. while she was packing up her things. She needed transportation and a place to live. She needed a job. She needed something to hold onto.

“They called me back right away and said ‘When would you like to come?’” she says. “What a great feeling. I remember calling my mom and telling her I’d be home to see her again. She’s my best friend.”

Within a week of arriving at the facility, she had a waitressing job and a secure, safe place to live.

“Veteran’s Inc. puts families back together after they’ve left to protect people they don’t even know,” she says. “Knowing that there are people out there – veterans who have no place to go, who have put everything aside, who have children. It’s sad.”

“It’s nice to see that cycle. They’re giving back to them, because they’ve given for others. For me, it’s been a dream come true,” she says.

Veterans Inc. has helped Suzanne restart her life, and get on the road to attaining one of her longtime aspirations – a college education.

After getting back on her feet, Suzanne continued her work in law. Although the similarities between military and civil law were not very strong, she worked in law offices. A representative from Quinsigamond Community College visited the facility, and through the help of Veterans Inc., she is now studying criminal justice and is in the honor’s program.

Suzanne is lively, her eyes lighting up as she talks about how wonderful it is to see the kids in the on-site preschool, and how thankful she is to have access to all the opportunities at Veterans Inc.

“Someone cares whether you walk through those doors every day or not,” she says.

Outside the interview room, in the front corridor, it’s an exciting day. A new resident is being given a warm welcome before being shown to her room upstairs, and the cycle of help is starting again.

“That’s what life is all about – helping people help people,” Uncapher said. “Even if it’s just a smile or a greeting. That’s why we’re here. We all need that at some point.”