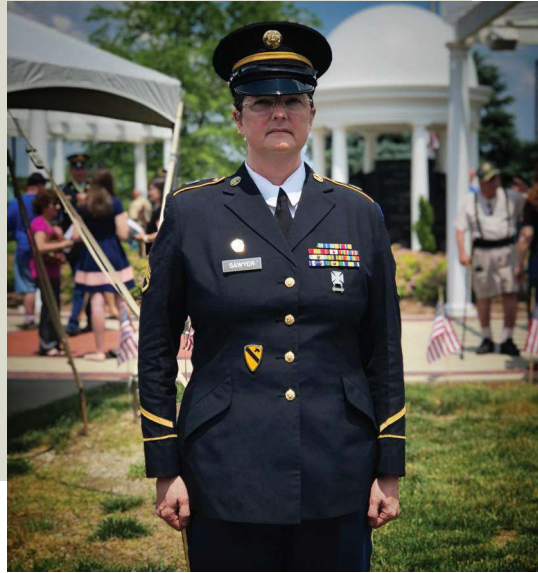


INSIDE THE LOUISVILLE VET CENTER

BY
RASHIDA
ASANTE-
ECCLESTON



After returning from deployment, soldiers may encounter difficulty adjusting to civilian life. The Louisville Vet Center helps veterans make that transition with services available free of charge.

The Vet Center was started after recognition that many veterans from the Vietnam War were not accessing their benefits, partially a result of the negative stigma attached to accessing Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare. Lobbying by the Vietnam Veterans of America led to congressional mandates that put money aside specifically for this program. Although originally created for veterans of the Vietnam War, eligibility has expanded to include veterans of any future conflict. Vet Centers can be found in many cities across the country.

The Center focuses on “whole health,” a model of care that seeks wellness in all areas of life. As such, the staff helps veterans with any aspect of their lives in which they would like assistance, including the

areas of mental health, financial and employment needs, and a sense of community. Staff at the Center will refer veterans to other VA organizations or additional community resources depending on client needs. Vet Centers were set up specifically in residential areas to create an inviting atmosphere, an environment reflected by a relaxed dress code and the presence of many veterans on staff.

Services offered at the Louisville Vet Center fall under readjustment services, a broad term for helping veterans reorient themselves into civilian life. Services at the Center are open-ended, which means that a veteran will not be denied after a certain number of appointments have passed. Service members who were not sent to combat zones but may have experienced secondary trauma or hardship related to their service can also receive care.

In addition to individual therapy, the Vet Center also offers group sessions to create a community for

veterans with similar experiences. Group sessions may be based around a certain theme or combat area, while some contain veterans across eras with the goal of creating a social outlet. Marital and family counseling are also available for veteran families, as well as bereavement services for the family members of military personnel who died in service.

Accessing resources at the Vet Center also provides an element of privacy that might not be available if veterans receive care while on base, which would make their medical information potentially visible to their chain of command and may affect their eligibility for jobs within the military.

Deborah “Debbie” Sawyer works at the Louisville Vet Center as the Veteran Outreach Program Specialist, a position that puts her in touch with veterans in her community. Her journey in veterans’ services began when she was a member of the Indiana Army National Guard and was deployed to Afghanistan. After returning home from deployment and struggling with issues related to finding employment, she sought out services at the Louisville Vet Center. As she got to know the staff and clientele and participated in the Shakespeare with Veterans program, she became interested in working for the Center itself.

“My favorite program that we offer here is the Shakespeare with Veterans Program,” Debbie said. Through this program, veterans meet weekly to discuss and perform Shakespeare. She quotes the co-founder of the program, Fred Johnson, on his thoughts about Shakespeare’s relation to the Center’s work: “No one speaks more directly to the warrior’s heart than William Shakespeare.” Shakespeare with Veterans “is the most diverse group that I’ve ever been a part of,” Debbie said, as the members of this program stretch across generations and combat areas.

“We’re here and we’re ready,” Debbie said. “I want the community at large and veterans to know that we’re here and we care.”

VERNE

BY
RASHIDA ASANTE-ECCLESTON

BODDY

Verne Boddy, Brown Theatre Technical Director, has over two decades of experience. Over the course of his career, Verne continues to carry the lessons he learned during his time in the military in the 70s.

Verne comes from a patriotic family—his father fought in the Korean War and the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) organization was an important part of his family's social life. Following in his father's footsteps, he volunteered to join the army when he was only a teenager.

His main role in the army was a clerk position in which he performed an assortment of duties from driving officers around, working with computers, and repairing items as needed. While in the military, Verne became a father to a baby boy.

Verne left the military in early 1975. When he returned home, he did not feel respected or supported.

"I had served my country," he said, "I had done nothing to be ashamed of, but I was made to feel that I had nothing to be proud of either." It took years before other people began to thank him for his service. Veterans may also find it challenging to discuss their work in the military with those who have not served.

"At some point in time you can share your experience," Verne said, "But not necessarily with civilians, so you join the veterans groups." This desire for an understanding community may drive veterans to join military organizations to find companionship. Initially, Verne was not interested in joining any military organizations and

wanted to put this experience behind him. He did not join VFW or American Legion until 1990.

For the first couple of years after his service, Verne lived a hippy lifestyle in Panama City, Florida, taking odd jobs, hitchhiking from one place to another, and sleeping on friends' couches. His young son is what encouraged him to pursue a different path.

"I remember calling my son on his birthday and he asked 'Daddy, when are you coming home?'" Verne described. This realization made him reconsider the example that he was setting for his son. Soon after, Verne moved to Kentucky to be closer to his son, who was living in Indiana with his mother.

Verne's first "real" job after leaving the military was working as a Computer Operator at University of Louisville. This position called upon some of his experience with electronics gained from being in the army. In addition to his computer skills, he was also able to utilize another lesson learned from his experience.

The military "taught me self-confidence and not to be afraid just because I hadn't done something before," he said. He was certain in his ability to learn how to perform a task and be able to carry it out on his own, which led to a lot of on the job learning in his role.

Seeking a career change, Verne worked on houseboats and cabin

cruisers before getting into crew work. After getting laid off from his work on ships, he tried out stage work, using the carpentry experience that he had gained from his job. After working on a couple of movies, Verne received his union card and has been working in the field full time since 1991. He started off as the "props guy" and loved the work enough to take on his current role.

Today, Verne is a proud member of the crew at Brown Theatre and has three sons who work in the same field. In addition to the life lessons he learned from his time in the army, he also appreciates the comradery that the military has provided. "You're never alone," he said, recalling a



time when he recently met up with a former bunkmate.

Through personal and professional changes, Verne is able to call upon the lessons he learned while in the military: discipline, self-confidence, and the self-preservation to continue in the face of any challenge.