



GREATNESS BY ASSOCIATION

No single identity carries more gravitas within our society than that of a veteran of the US Armed Forces. They realize almost universal bipartisan support, an extreme rarity at this moment in history. Support or outrage on the behalf of veterans is often invoked as a means of defending any number of partisan positions. Their willingness to put “service before self” and sacrifice for our country embodies the notion of American Greatness for many people across a wide social strata—veterans and non-veterans alike. | By Seth Gordon



I am not a veteran. I am fascinated by veterans. I despise war and yet am enamored by the stories of heroism and sacrifice during war. Like many who find themselves supporting veterans in any capacity, two things become clear. First is that veterans are heterogeneous in almost every way—politics, religion, demographics, and core principles. I have met those for whom their service is a centerpiece of who they are and it still fills them with pride as much as 50 years later. I have met those for whom their service was compulsory and feel the theft of their youth. The idea of anyone speaking on behalf of “them” as a single unified group is offensive.

Second, while each veteran is unique, they have all shared the same broad mission. They have all put on the uniform and sworn an oath to defend the Constitution of the United States with their lives. They did this regardless of their attitude toward their service. They have a shared language across branch, MOS (military occupational specialty), and geography. They share a reverence or respect for the flag that is different than most. They have served and sacrificed for the concept of “American Greatness.” One of the most insightful and painfully honest moments I have witnessed was when a veteran turned executive/community leader told a group that “nothing would ever come close to being as meaningful as their service in the military.”

A concept is an abstract idea with a specific definition (thank you Dr. Hoy). For veterans, that abstract has been augmented by the tangible pomp and tradition of the military. It has been brought to life by their experiences of different places and duties while serving. Most importantly their version of American Greatness lives in the often unspoken—and sometimes shared—stories that they have in common with other veterans.

The average age of the student veteran at Wright State University (WSU) is 30. The age range is 19 to 65. Thirty percent are women and all branches but the Coast Guard are represented by more than one at WSU. They are attracted to STEM almost as much as the liberal arts, as well as pursuing business and nursing as professions. After almost two decades of war and deployments—and despite being less than one percent of the population—they defy the image of the stereotypical veteran by being at the beginning of their post-service lives. The American veteran is no longer a bunch of old guys at the local VFW drinking cheap beer. They are the young professionals striving to make it in America.

But unlike WWII veterans whose return from war changed society, they are frequently doing so in comparative isolation. Many hear “thank you for your service” and enjoy it. Many find it confusing because they hold their service in comparison to other veterans. Other veterans are not abstract to them; we—the non-veteran public—hold them in high esteem. For us they represent “American Greatness.” For each other, they can still be figuring it all out.

When I started working at the Veteran and Military Center, I faced a unique dilemma. How to assist the student veterans served at WSU in making sense of a disorienting transition from service member back to being civilians. The challenge was greatest for two groups: those who had been separated due to medical reasons and combat veterans. How could I support a group whose experience was so rarified?

The answer was by getting them to talk to each other. Specifically to get the younger generation to have a conversation with the living veterans of WWII, Korea, or Vietnam. During a master class with StoryCorps founder David Isay, I heard him say “the thing you can do most to honor someone is listen to their story.” What if we could get student veterans to listen to the stories of older veterans?

We created Veterans Voices so that this generation of student veterans could talk to other veterans. Using the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, we trained student veterans to serve their fellow veterans by gathering their stories, specifically their oral histories. We currently have six students working on this project. Over the past two-and-a-half years they have gathered over 120 oral histories (all of them can be found at corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/veterans_voices). A few of the students have graduated and moved on. What is clear is that in the sharing of the stories, they are experiencing the notion of “American Greatness” through their association with each other. They are seeing the courage and humility of the few WWII veterans still alive who always seem to think someone else had it harder. They know about the hardship of Vietnam veterans and realize how lucky they are to hear someone say “thank you for your service.” And they are beginning to understand that whatever way they choose to make sense of their service, it will be great. ♥

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