

Borne the Battle

Episode # 127

Student Veteran of the Year finalists: Chanel Powell and Tyler Freeman

Hosted by Tim Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Opening Music

[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Wednesday, January 9th, 2019. This is *Borne the Battle* brought to you by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I am your host, Marine Corps Veteran, Timothy Lawson. We are continuing our week of content and interviews from SVA's NatCon, which I attended last week. Monday, we talked with president of Student Veterans of America, Jared Lyon. Yesterday we spoke with three Student Veteran of the Year Finalists and today we will speak to two more. We originally had three set for the interview but the third was unable to make the recording session and unfortunately was not able to follow up with her. So, just the two today. We're gonna learn from Student Veterans Chanel Powell and Tyler Freeman. We're gonna learn about their chapters' big wins in 2018, learn about their outreach philosophies, and how to get student Veterans to participate. Then we're also gonna talk a little bit about including military-connected personnel such as ROTC students, dependents, military spouses, etc. in their chapters' endeavors. Enjoy.

[00:01:17] Music

[00:01:21] PSA:

Man 1: I served in Vietnam.

Man 2: I served in World War II.

Woman 1: I served in Afghanistan.

Man 1: And VA serves us all.

Man 2: No matter when you served.

Woman 1: No matter if you saw combat or not.

Man 1: There are benefits for Veterans of every generation.

Woman 1: See what VA can do for you.

Narrator: To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov. That's www.va.gov.

[00:01:48] Music

[00:01:53] INTERVIEW:

TL: Chanel, we will start with you. Give us a name, university, year, and what you're studying, and what your role is at the chapter there.

Chanel Powell (CP): My name is Chanel Powell. I go to the University at Buffalo. I'm in my Junior year and I am president of my chapter out of the SVA.

TL: Perfect. Tyler.

Tyler Freeman (TF): So, my name's Tyler Freeman. I'm a first-year MBA/Juris Master's candidate at Emory University. My MBA concentration's in finance and I'm also at the law school working on an MNA Master's degree. My involvement with my chapter, the Emory Veterans Association, I'm the Chief of Staff. So, what I like to say is, is that while the president and vice president are making decisions, I'm making it happen. Happy to be here.

TL: I like that. Very good. Chanel, we're gonna- we'll start with you as we wait for our third member, if they, if they get here. Tell us, tell us what a big win that your chapter had in 2018.

CP: I'd say our biggest win was getting started. So, we are the newest chapter of the SVA. –

TL: Oh, that's awesome.

CP: Just this past semester we were recognized. Last semester was actually my first semester in the school, so we just hit the ground running, getting formed up. That was the biggest thing. Getting members,

getting our student Vets to come together, and get the comradery that we all want.

TL: Very cool. Tyler, what'd you have, what did you guys have doing in 2018?

TF: Gosh, you had to start with that. That's so hard to beat. I mean, it's so wonderful –

TL: Yeah.

TF: -getting started. You know, Emory's in a very similar position. Right? Emory is a highly-selective university in the South and one of the things that we have to overcome is getting Veterans to apply. You know, we're not in the Ivy League but in some instances, we view ourselves having the same challenges that those highly-selective universities do. And one of the interesting things was is that we had applicants, but no one was accepting our offers to attend because of what they thought were hurdles to admissions or hurdles to finance or being in Atlanta away from their family. Or the environment at Emory. They didn't think that there were a lot of Veterans there that could be representative of their population or who they wanted to be. So, a win for our chapter is, we worked with the admissions and showed them, "Look we have Veterans that are applying, they're just not saying 'yes' to us." –

TL: Yeah.

TF: So, why don't we say "yes" to them earlier? And why don't we fly 10 of them to Emory University, undergraduate candidates that have- we've extended acceptances to. Let's fly 'em to the university, on our dime. Put 'em up in the campus hotel and then have them interact with the student Veterans here on campus. Let's have them experience campus as it is, right? As a liberal arts, very diverse campus where they can learn so much about themselves and the community. But then also, pair them with an MBA student that can serve as a mentor for them and then show them what Emory University is about. So, we're moving that barrier and convincing people, through Emory's ability to finance their travel, to experience our university for what it's all about. –

TL: Yeah.

TF: And that's what we're excited about implementing in March this year.

TL: That's incredible.

TF: Yeah.

TL: How established is your chapter there at Emory?

TF: So, our chapter's been established for a few years now at this point. I'm the chief of staff. Jesse Sladek is the president of the association. We also have a treasurer. One of the interesting things about Emory is our undergraduate population is, is very small. In fact, it's almost non-existent. And the interesting thing about that –

TL: It's interesting.

TF: Is that our graduate programs have the predominant number of Veterans on campus. Between 44 MBA students that are Veterans across all the MBA programs and around 90 Veterans on campus as a whole, most of them are in graduate programs. And so, my job at Emory is to convince the undergraduate community that Veterans are the smart choice to bring on campus and that's what we're attacking as saying, "Look, we're great candidates." I'm enlisted. I am the only enlisted person in my business school class in the graduate school. And so, I'm trying to show them there are people, like me, that deserve a high-flying education that Emory can provide. So, we're really working on building our chapter. I'd say Chanel is actually ahead of us in making sure that Veterans on campus have a voice. And at Emory, we're trying to make sure that the university puts their money where their mouth is and brings more of us on campus in an undergraduate capacity.

TL: Yeah. That's wonderful. Chanel, what're, what is, what're you guys doing up in Buffalo to, for, for outreach? You're brand new, a brand-new chapter. The big, a big struggle that people have on campus is letting Veterans know, not only are you here, but you should be a part of. A lot of Veterans, we had this problem at American University, where there were plenty of Veterans that were on campus that didn't want to associate with the vet... with the, with the chapter. And so, we both wanted to respect their distance while also making sure they understood the value that the chapter had. What was your outreach plan in Buffalo?

CP: Of course. So, I, I think the biggest thing was finding and identifying Veterans. Now, I don't know about you guys, but we're pretty easy to

spot. Whether it be the backpack, the haircut, you know, we know what we look like. So, I literally started just going up to anybody with a backpack, anybody with a, with a high and tight. Like “Hey, are you enlisted? Are you prior service? Are you a Vet?” And they’d either be like “Get away from me –

TL: [Laughing]

CP: Or like yeah, yeah, why?” –

TF: Definitely. For sure. Spot them from across a room –

CP: Yeah. Then I, I would just, I would attack from there. It’s like, “Hey, me too. Well lemme talk to ya, I have snacks in my backpack. I can show you a really cool lounge. –

TF: Food. That sounds- [Inaudible]

CP: There are games. We have coffee. Like, lemme, lemme talk to ya a little bit more about, about us okay?” There’s more of us. I’m trying to find ‘em. So, the biggest thing, is like, for me is just hitting the campus and finding each and every person and grabbing them.

TF: I love that method of outreach, right? –

CP: [Laughter]

TF: Just the grassroots effort that you took. You know, and I think that you hit the nail on the head. What’s the value that we’re articulating? And that’s what we’ve really focused our efforts on at Emory is saying, you know, “Here are the reasons why you should be a part of our chapter, why you should actively participate.” And why, you know, if, if we view it like as self-declaration, right, “How are you self-selecting into the Emory Veterans Association?” And we looked at from a standpoint of what are we providing students with that make us worth their time? Because as busy undergraduate students, you know, they have so much going on in their lives already between class, and they’re looking... You know, most people who apply to Emory University are transfer students. So, they’re probably sophomores or juniors. They’re looking for internships. So, they’re super duper busy. So, what we looked at is, is what are prof... what are the professional development opportunities that we’re giving them? We have world-class faculty at the business school. We’ve got a lot of military talent that, that’s in graduate school,

that has a lot of experience in where these undergraduate students are at right now. So, how are we providing them with opportunities for professional development? How are we giving them opportunities to connect with influential alumni to help them progress? 'Cuz everybody wants to go to college to get a better job, get a better life. And so, how are we enabling our students to know that this is what you get when you sign up to be part of Emory Veterans Association. So, we're really focusing on the professional development, the networking skills, and just making sure that they know they have a community of people that they can rely on, on campus, that are always gonna be there regardless of where the wind's blowing that day.

TL: Chanel, once you had people in the, once people are attracted to the chapter, they're there, now it's time for, like, activities, events, whatever may be, what, whatever activities that you get your chapter going, one of the big prob... On campus, in general, not just for student Veterans, but on campus in general, there's a, there's a difficult time getting people to go from being interested in something –

CP: To being active.

TL: to actually participating in that, in that event. What did you do this past year to, to motivate participation?

CP: So, my biggest thing was asking the chapter members, "What are you interested in? What do you wanna do? How you wanna help your community that you're now living in?" Right? And once you get their interests, once you ask them what they need and what they want to change, they're kind of obligated. It was their idea. –

TL: Yeah.

CP: You know? These are changes that you wanna see happen. So, I, I will put it into fruition, you know? We can put the idea out there but when it comes time to actually, you know, put your money where the mouth is, you hafta go out and do it. And with it being their idea, they're now motivated to also help you recruit, also help you go out and hit the ground running to make the changes that they talked about in the first place.

TL: Yeah. Absolutely. Tyler?

TF: You know, I've paid a lot of money to a great business school to learn what that's called and it's the voice of the customer, right? –

TL: Yeah.

TF: Her saying, "Hey Veteran, what can I do for you so that you can do for me?" And soliciting that by and that's so smart. I mean, look, you are much better for that and listening to them and attracting them in that way. I think that, in a very similar vein, we're attracting Veterans to... You know, our biggest issue at Emory is just getting Veterans there. –

TL: Yeah.

TF: We think that they're, that they wanna be involved because the population is pretty small. And what we've tried to do is really create a robust environment where we've got feelers out with the Community Affairs Office. Like, look we have access to so many programs that Emory provides, in terms of community service, whether it's mentoring young kids with Big Brother Big Sister, or whether it's actually out there enhancing the ability for people with English as a Second Language to speak English here. And I'll open, and work with their families, even, to get better jobs in and around Atlanta. The Buford Highway area is where a lot of immigrants come in, first-generation Americans are, and Emory is very active there. And what's interesting is, is Veterans are really interested in working with that first generation American because they spent so much time in Iraq and Afghanistan –

CP: Exactly.

TF: With people who really value these freedoms. –

TL: Sure.

TF: I can't tell you how many times, or often it is that, you know, that I hear a Veteran go, "Man I got into this taxicab the other day and it was an Afghan driving it and it was the best conversation ever." Because the Afghan National is like, "I knew you guys from when you were there –

CP: Yeah.

TF: My family was there. You guys saved me." –

TL: Yeah.

TF: And then the Veteran's really tied to that immigrant community. And, you know, Emory has a lot of opportunities for Veterans to be involved. And I think it's finding those common interests, right? Where's the university wanting to put their efforts at, and how can Veterans best impact that mission? Because it's what good, what's good for the goose, it's good for the gander. If we want school support, we have to support the school. And so, if we find out what's important to them, utilizing very similar to Chanel and the voice of the customer, we ask the school, "Hey school, what are your primary focuses? What are you most interested in?" Right? And how can we utilize Veterans and their expertise on campus to make attractive opportunities for them to help the school? The school sees us as more active in the community. It changes the narrative from Wounded Warrior to social impact manager, right? –

CP: Yes.

TF: And so, now we've got Veterans that are in it for the right reasons, helping the university. The university sees it and makes us more of a priority. So how can we make this really, really robust feedback loop throughout the university and that's how we're providing value to our Veterans and our chapter.

TL: Very Cool. –

CP: That's amazing.

TL: Yeah, that is amazing. There's a great story, I'm not, I'm not gonna retell it cuz I don't know it all. But there's a great story from like 2, 2 or 3 years ago of a Veteran 5, 6 years after he'd gotten back from, from deployment, was visiting some city. Gets in a taxicab and a translator that he worked with in-country was his driver. –

TF: [Inaudible] –

CP: No way. –

TL: And he realized it like halfway through the ride and like they just pulled over and like had this big embrace. It's a, it's a really amazing story.

TF: Yeah. It's, it's like Atlanta is such a diverse city. People come there. It's, it's a really big hub in the south for, for immigrant families. And we were at a restaurant the other day, and, you know, an Afghan National owned the restaurant. And, you know, it was me, an Army Ranger buddy of mine, and a Marine Corps Supply Officer that's now at Emory, as well, and our significant others. And we're sitting at the table and this guy tells us a story about how he made it to America. And had an Emory Univers... er, Emory Veterans Association challenge coin in my pocket. And I'm like, "You know what, I don't really care that, you know, we don't know each other very much but I want you to know that we appreciate you being here." –

TL: Yeah.

TF: And, you know, just giving him that token of appreciation lets him know that they are Veterans in this community that value his journey. And we're appreciative. Like we grow part of that population that when we're over there, fighting these wars. And we come home, and we find opportunities like that, and that was just, it was really interesting. And I hate to digress but –

TL: No, that's fine.

TF: You know. That's handing him a challenge coin from Emory University. That's a lot of brand equity –

TL: Yeah.

TF: that, that we gain in a very simple gesture and it's important for us to make sure that they know that they're welcome here.

TL: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. When I was, when I was a Marine Corps Security Guard we had, we would have detachment coins. Whenever I travelled, I always brought 10, 10 of them with me. –

TF: Yeah.

TL: And if we'd go to a bar if we'd go to someone's house, whatever it may be, like it went to the bartender, the business owner, the café person. Like, like, "Hey, like I'm, I'm a Marine. I'm a, a United States military personnel in your community and I wanna show you, that like we, like I

value, you know, you hosting us here, and, you know, in your business, and stuff like that." It was, –

TF: Definitely.

TL: it was always powerful. –

TF: Super smart.

TL: When you guys were building... I don't know... If the answer is no, the answer is no, but do, do you guys have any inclusion of dependents, ROTC students, other, other military-connected personnel there in your chapter?

CP: So, not directly in my chapter. However, there was a lounge that was donated to us by "Lucky" Davis. –

TL: Okay.

CP: And so, in that lounge, we have right across the hall, ROTC. So that way we're all close and we're able to, you know, be the, the standard that they are looking up to. Because at the end of the day, they're gonna serve in the military that we've already served in. –

TL: Sure.

CP: Right? So, we want to set the example on how to be a better leader and so we keep them close to us, kinda put them under our wing. Try to mentor them. Make sure they're succeeding in, you know, their grades, and, and just socially, being a good leader and a good person. So, we're close by. We work with, we, we have dependents in the lounge, however, they're not a part of our group yet. As of right now, it's just the Veterans and our community we're trying to build.

TL: Yeah. Sure. What sort of connection do you guys have over at Emory with other military-connected students?

TF: Yeah, that's a great question. So, there are actually several spouses in the, the business school. So, I'm, obviously as an MBA student, I'm in the business school most, most days. You know, there are several spouses of prior service Marines that I know, which is really interesting,

they're all spouses of Marines. Thank goodness because, you know, there are clearly not enough Marines at Emory University –

TL: [Laughter]

TF: being around Fort Benning and Savannah, Georgia, right next to the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions. It's great. But speaking of the Ranger Battalions, there's a guy whose name is Major Jason Wade Zullis, he goes by Jay. And Jay and I have become really great friends, and, you know, Jay is the preeminent warfighter. He's on loan to us from the U.S. Army for a couple of years. I think he's got like 7 deployments under his belt to Afghanistan. Loves what he does, like just, day in and day out. Bringing the fight to the enemy. But he's a really great mentor for young folks. And what's interesting about Emory is, there are 14 ROTC cadets that call Emory home. And they recognize the value of military service after their undergraduate education, even at a school like Emory University, which we think is lovely. You know, Emory's got a great tradition of military service between serving in the hospital corps and everything like that, and all the world wars that we had. But we send our ROTC students to Georgia Tech 'cuz they have a much more established program. They've got an ROTC instructor there. But I told you about Jay because Jay takes his time out of his MBA schedule. He's got a family and things like that. He goes, and he mentors these ROTC cadets so that they know that Emory is there for them when they need them. We've got this leadership in place. A major in the Army that's been fighting a war for the last decade of his life, mentoring these young students and grooming them into something. And so that's how we bring the military-connected folks to there. Just, even though they haven't technically, well they've started, I guess, as ROTC cadets. They've done some stuff. You know, helicopter operations. They go over the summer, depending on where they are in the process. But, we're making sure that they understand that there's a robust community here for them. And that just because they're leaving, doesn't mean that they won't have a place to come back to. –

TL: Yeah.

TF: So, how can we make Emory really inclusive for all manner of military-connected folks? And that's one of the ways that we do it.

TL: Okay. One more question. I know I didn't prime you guys for but since, you know, it ran a little fast not having a third member. So Imna, Imna get one more question out of you guys. Chanel, we'll start with you.

This is especially valuable since you just started your, just opened your chapter. What sort of interactions have you had with like the campus, the university, and like what have you, what challenge maybe that you'd face on, on getting resources or getting some sort of understanding, support, whatever it may be, and how did you guys handle that?

CP: Yeah that's a great question. So, you know how everyone always talks about bridging the gap? –

TL: Yeah.

CP: So, my biggest thing was, we have a great support system at the University of Buffalo. I mean, there were challenges that we faced in the beginning trying to bridge that gap because everybody wants to say, you know, "Bridge it, bridge it. Here are the, here are the tools." But then we have to do a hop, leap, and a skip to the other side of the bridge. I just need, you know, we don't need our hand held, we need directions. We're a great group of people who have, you know, the leadership and the skills from our prior service. We don't, we don't need a handheld. We need just simple directions so that we can walk across this bridge and get to the other side. –

TL: Yeah.

CP: So, my biggest thing was making sure that I'm trying to connect us with the traditional students. You know, we wanna try destigmatize the idea of, you know, all of our wonderful Vets with our wonderful beards and you know, big tough bad guys. Because at the end of the day, we're people that you wanna know. Okay? We are people that are here to help. We are here to make sure that you are able to live your best life, you're able to succeed, you're able to, you know, educate yourself in all aspects of the world 'cuz we've traveled it. So, my biggest thing was trying to create programs that we include traditional students with. Like south, south campus boot camp is a thing we did. So military people, we get to have fun, see, see these kids running around, doing an obstacle course, right? That's military style. And all the, all the traditional students came out. They wanted to be a part of it. But the biggest and best part was that they were also there to help us build care packages, help us write letters. We got over a thousand care packages for deployed Veterans put out and with the traditional students' help.

TL: That's amazing.

TF: Please keep talking.

CP: [Laughing]

TF: Yeah, come on.

TL: Yeah, naw. Yeah, what else, what else you got?

CP: So, I mean that, that was really the biggest thing though –

TL: Okay.

CP: is making sure you're able to connect with the traditional students, other groups. There's a Muslim Student Association in our campus. We connected with them. Just connecting with the groups that, you know, there's a stigma against because at the end of the day, we're a minority. We're the one percent, right? So, you wanna connect with the other 99. It's not up to them to try to connect to us. We have to reach out to them. You know you want –

TL: Sure. –

TF: Truer words have not been spoken. –

TL: Yeah.

CP: It's, it's so important to reach your hand out and let them know, "Hey, we're here, and we're nice, and we wanna help you get to wherever you wanna be." Because at the end of the day, relationships are fostered by partnership. They're fostered by friendship. And you have to be willing to put your hand out to, to meet in the middle and shake and say we're, we're all here together. And that's what the community is about. That's what college is about, you know? We're, we're old enough to where we're not going to school to find ourselves –

TL: Right.

CP: As nontraditional students, we're, we're old enough. We, we already know who we are.

TF: Yeah.

CP: But we've, we have goal set in place, right? But we're around, you know, these 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds, who are trying to find themselves. And it's, it's important that you look at them and you say... Yeah, at times it could be a little frustrating, hearing the things that they complain about. Hearing the things that they're struggling with, but you have to understand they're growing. You know, I'm only 22, so I'm, I'm growing, as well. I don't know it all by any means. And every day –

TF: You sound like it.

CP: No, not even close –

TL: [Laughing.]

CP: Every day we all strive to learn something new, right? –

TL: Yeah.

CP: No matter how old you are. So, it's so important that we're helping these, these younger students, you know, make sure that they're learning something from us and, and that our ears are open to learn from them as well. Because you're never too old to learn something from anybody. They can be 18 years old and teach you something you never knew. So, just reaching to that other side.

TL: Yeah. I wish more Veterans understood that notion that you also have to put an effort with connecting with your community and the people around you. Like you can't just, you can't wait for them to come to you. So, I, I agree. Truer words have never been spoken. –

CP: [Laughing.] –

TF: Man. It's hard, it's hard to follow that up. You know it's interesting. She.... Once again, it's a lesson that I'm paying a lot of money to learn that she already knows. In essence, what she is talking about is networking, right? –

TL: Yeah.

TF: How are you growing that network and also growing your sponsorship? What can I do for you, so that you can do for me? –

TL: Strategic partner..., strategic partnerships. –

TF: Exactly, you know? And sometimes it's about, just spreading the word enough and then seeing what sticks –

TL: Yeah.

TF: and who's gonna come out and who's gonna reach across the table halfway. Heck, if I have to go 60% of the way, I'm willing to make that relationship work, right? So, we talked about resources at Emory and all manner of things. And I think it's important to know that, you know, Emory supports its Veterans. We've got... One way that we show that is, is our Dean of Leadership Development is Lieutenant General Ken Keen. He led a Hurth quake- Haiti earthquake relief efforts. He was a former regimental commanding officer of the 75th Ranger Regiment. You know, a warfighter in and of his own right and a legend in his community. And now he is at Emory University developing business students as the next generation of Emory's leaders. And so, we have robust support throughout the universities, for the business school's administration. And we've got support all the way up to, I'm really proud of this, the president of the university, Claire Sterk. Her husband is a Vietnam Veteran.

TL: Hmm.

TF: And so, the husband of the president of the university, of the university as a whole, is a Veteran. And so, we use, use those connections, those leaders- those leadership levels that are in Emory, to navigate the bureaucracy of higher education. To do exactly what she says. I don't need you to hold my hand. I just need you to tell me who to talk to. –

TL: Yeah.

TF: I have an idea. I need you to tell me whether or not we can do it. And if it's a no, how do we get to a yes? Right? And so, we use those layers of administration to get things like we have our annual Vet Connect-In where we invite employers from around Atlanta to come in and the school pays for this. For its Veterans to go to, to network with other employers. It's a big schmoozefest. It's really great. And it happens

every year and the school pays for it because it shows it's Veterans that, "Hey, the resources are here. We want Veterans to succeed at Emory." You know, on top of that, the business school, 50 Yellow Ribbon scholarships that aren't endowed, the business school pays for it out of its operating budget. Right? –

TL: Wow.

TF: Veterans are so important to Emory. Through its leadership, levels, and through getting Veterans there, that the school is willing to pay 50, fully-funded Yellow Ribbon scholarships, to Veterans to come to campus at the business school. And so, the university is making the resources available to get undergraduate Veterans there, as I mentioned earlier. The 10 that they are gonna fly down to, to make sure that we can bridge that gap between communicating the value that we can provide. The scholarships that the business school offers. The leadership levels that are there. The willingness for the folks at the administrative levels to work with us. I can't tell you how many times I've talked to the Chief of Staff for the president. We clearly, we get along 'cuz we're both Chiefs of Staff, right? And so, we see eye to eye on so many things, and he's opened up so many doors. And it's exactly what Chanel talks about. It's, we don't need your money, we need your help. –

TL: Yeah.

TF: Right? How do we, how do we navigate these channels to get access to the person or resources? The money helps, but I only want your money if I can give you something in return.

CP: Exactly.

TF: Recognizing the value of Veterans here at the university. What we're doing for the community. The leadership that we're doing afterwards and the benefits we're providing afterwards, as well. That's when we can have a talk about what can you do for me. But I want the university to recognize the value that we can provide and then once we do that, let's have the resources conversation. And Emory's knocking it out of the park.

TL: That's awesome. That's wonderful. Chanel. Tyler. Thank you so much for joining me. –

TF: Sure thing. Thanks for having me. –

CP: Thank you. –

TL: Your insight has been great. Tyler, I, I really appreciate you carving time out of your busy schedule to sit down and talk to us.

TF: Yeah. I'm going to a team meeting right as soon as we are done here so I've got homework to do. Student Veteran, student comes first.

TL: Yeah. I love it. Alright, thank you so much for joining me.

CP: Thank you so much.

TL: Cheers.

[00:24:55] Music Out