

This Week at VA

Episode # 22

Debra Russell – Navy Veteran, Photographer

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/36057/debra-russell-navy-veteran-artist/>

(Text Transcript Begins)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:03] PSA:

Man: VA's around the clock hotline can put veterans who are homeless in touch with the resources and support they earned through their military service. Call 877-424-3838.

[00:00:15] Music

[00:00:27] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Hello, everyone. This is Episode 22 of *This Week at VA*. I'm your host, Marine Corps Veteran Timothy Lawson. This week's episode will feature another participant in the Women Veterans Art Exhibit. Before we get to our interview with that Veteran, I want to give a quick spotlight to a cool event that occurred on Wednesday evening. HillVets had their HillVets 100 Gala near Capitol Hill in Washington DC. The Gala was in celebration to recognize the 100 people named by HillVets as Noteworthy Influencers in the Veteran community. Included on the list is Secretary of Veterans' Affairs, David Shulkin and Marine Corps Veteran Matt Steiner who's a career employee here at VA. Also mentioned on the list were former Secretary Bob McDonald and a member of his staff, Brian Hawthorn. Considering the recognitions of current and former VA employees, along with Warrior Athletes that take advantage of our adaptive sports program, VA has a nice representation on the HillVets 100 and we wanna thank HillVets for including our personnel and putting on a cool event that honors deserving people from within our community. To see the list in its entirety, go to hillvets.org [link to the HillVets website]. Today's features interviews with Navy Veteran Debra Russell. Debra served honorably in the Navy from 1984 to 1997. She reluctantly separated after being med-boarded from the running accident. Debra is going to talk to us about

serving in the Navy, experiencing military sexual trauma, attending her local Vet center, and discovering photography and art as a way to cope.

[00:01:48] Music

[00:01:53] INTERVIEW:

TL: Uh, hi everybody, we're here with Debra Russell, a Navy Veteran who – uh, is one of the ten artists – a part of the Women Veteran's Art Exhibit sponsored by the Center for – uh, Women Veteran's. Debra thank you so much for joining me.

Debra Russell (DR): Hi, glad to be here.

TL: So Debra, we're going to start this interview with the same way we start all our interviews. One thing that we all have in common is the decision to join the United States military. You – uh, joined the Navy. Bring us back to that day for you. Why did you decide to join?

DR: Well I was in school as a single parent, I had a son and I was – um, working two jobs and trying to go to college to get a better job, and I got recruited from the bank I was working at, at the time – um, by a Navy recruiter with the enticement of paying for my education. And I needed the money, I needed the medical benefits as well. So that's why.

TL: And what – what year was that?

DR: That was in 1983.

TL: 1983.

DR: I actually signed up in 83' and you know when you're in college you wait till the – uh, summer to – to go to sc – go off to boot camp?

TL: Yeah.

DR: So that's what I did.

TL: Very well. I'm not going to tell you that I wasn't born yet. But, um...
[Laughter]

DL: [Laughter]

TL: Ah so 1983 – um, that was a – uh, relatively peaceful time – um, in – for America’s military. Uh, what was – um, what was your experience like? Can you – is there an experience you had during your service that sort of sums up – um, your – your tour?

DR: Well, I started out – um, doing supply, basic supply. And the way they did me, they did like an on hands type deal, where I took the skills, which was – my skills was in money and banking, and they took it and transferred over to logistics. And – um, so, I started out doing just basic jobs and I worked myself up to working on an admiral, four-star admiral staff. And – uh, I think that was like the height of my whole career because – um, it was a great job – uh, working in New Orleans at the – the headquarters for the four-star admirals.

TL: How long were you in? From 83’ to when?

DR: I actually, my duty time starts 84’ to 97’.

TL: 84’ to 97’, okay. That’s ah...

DR: Because I signed up in the delayed entry program.

TL: Right, okay. What – what prompted the decision to get out?

DR: If I had a choice, I never would have gotten out. [Laughter] Um, I was running one morning, about 5 a.m. and the female, we were running in formation. The female in front of me tripped and fell and I just rolled over her and messed my shoulders and my knees up and – um, I got med-boarded.

TL: Mmm.

DL: Um, and un – unfortunately, that really got to me and – um, right around the same time I wound up getting – um, sexually assaulted. And, so, all of that combin – combined, I was – um – uh, medically discharged.

TL: If you’re uncomfortable talking about – uh, that part of your – uh, service, I understand. But did you have an opportunity to report what happened to you before you were med-boarded?

DR: Well, the person had threatened me because it was a superior. And they had threatened me that if I told, that they were going to make it look like it was my fault. And – um, at the time, some other females had been – um, raped as well and I was seeing what they were going through. Uh, how the media and the courts and how the people were saying, ‘well it was your fault’ or ‘what did you do?’ And – and I didn’t really want to go through that humiliation.

TL: Yeah.

DR: Uh, I was already feeling kind – um, self-worthlessness and I just really – um, had to deal with it, I internalized it. I even went to work and had to hear him say stuff like – um, ‘well you know it was your fault. If you hadn’t have had those tight pants on, if this’ and you know he – he made it all my fault. I didn’t want to fight with him because I was, I wanted to be through with it. I wanted it to be over.

TL: Yeah.

DR: And so, I kind of – uh, blocked it for some years. I went through counseling right after then, and I continue to go to counseling for it because it’s something that you try to forget but it – it still you know, resonates. It pops up.

TL: Yeah. A, you know, a question that I like to ask Veterans um, simply because I feel like so many – uh, so many Veterans can resonate with this. And I’m sure there’s plenty of – uh, both men and women that can empathize with – uh, with your experience. When you – after you transitioned, did you – um, did you experience any sort of emotional crisis?

DR: Yeah, I really did. I went all the way down. I went – um, into a mental hospital over at – um, Gulf Port, Mississippi. And part of my problem was – um, I just really couldn’t deal with it at that point. It – you know, being medically discharged and all of that going on at the same time, it was very hard for me.

TL: Yeah.

DR: So, I had – I had a complete melt down to be honest with you. And – um, you know, it – it just happened.

TL: Yeah. Um, one thing that a lot of Veterans – uh, struggle to do after they transition is – uh, finding that renewed sense of purpose. Um, was that a challenge that you had as well?

DR: I had that challenge for years. Um, for years I found myself just kind of – um, laying around doing nothing, in the bed in pain. Um, and for years I was on pain meds, and the pain meds was actually killing me, and I didn't know it. Um, and I found that with the pain meds, I would sleep all day cause I had a lot of headaches as well. And I would sleep all – days upon days upon days, I would just sleep. And so, some years passed and one day, I said to myself 'Out of all this knowledge that you have – um, what is this worth'. You know, I went – I wound up going through some paperwork and looking at my skills and looking at who I was before this. And [clears throat] excuse me, and I realized that everything I had done and all that I had prepared for, and all the college and all the school, was nothing. And so, I felt like – uh, worthless in a poin – in a – in a sense. And so – um, still continuing to go through counseling – um, end up talking to my counselor, trying to be very honest with them. He said to me, 'you know, you tend to – um, take care of everybody else, you know, and not yourself'. And he had heard me say I wanted to – um, I eventually had wanted to get a master's degree. And um, he said to me 'why don't you do something about that?' Well it was after ten years, then, so you know, there was no money available for – for that, for rehab. Because I was passed that point. So – um, I just pushed it last year, I – I was starting to go backwards. And so, one of the things I did for myself was to go over there to that college and see what I could get in to try to get a bachelor's and a master's. And I applied for a scholarship and luckily, I got it for that semester. And so, I just started back to school and – and going to school is – is a two-fold purpose for me. One purpose is to get out of the house, to do something to increase my self-esteem. The other purpose was – um, well I guess that's the whole thing. To try to do something besides just staying in the bed, staying in the house and just at – at a dead end. And try to change that. So, I'm back in school, [laughter] I'm not saying that I'm not struggling.

TL: [Laughter]

DR: I'm still struggling. I mean, gosh, I said to myself, 'why did you do this'.

TL: [Laughter]

DR: It's awful [laughing]. Um, and one of the things that also helped was I got into some – um, female Veteran trauma group. I got into a Veteran female trauma group. And – um, I shared things that I – I guess I had stuffed for years.

TL: Yeah.

DR: Um, I shared those things and I was surprised. I wind up getting picked up for the telling project, you heard of that?

TL: Yeah, I've heard of the telling project, yeah.

DR: Okay, I wind up getting picked up for that and so when – um, Max wrote my – did my interview and – um, you know, you – you – you on the – on the camera, you're really just answering questions like I am now. Well he pulled out some points that I had told him about the sexual trauma and stuff like that. And he wrote the story based on that. And – um, for like 90 days, we was drill, drill, drill, drill. You know, telling our story. And one thing I had to realize in that, was I never told my family about that. So even my mother, my son, and – said 'well you never told us anything about you being sexually traumatized'. Well it was something that I really had stuffed. I wanted to forget it, so it was a part of my mind I was blocking out because I really didn't want to go there. So, talking to other females who had also gone through the same thing, kind of helped me to want to help somebody else who maybe had gone through that. And so – um, going to the Veteran fe – um, female group, and the other thing was going to – to the Veterans' photography group. When I first got out, I went to school for photography, but I wound up realizing that the cause of my sicknesses and stuff I really couldn't set appointments. So – um, but with this Veterans' photography group, I had a chance to go back and look at some of the pictures that I had taken and you know, they said 'go ahead and look and see if you can find some kind of picture when you come next week, you know, bring some pictures'. And I started going through pictures and then we started sending them to different – um, places and I won! I was shocked! [Laughter]

TL: [Laughter]

DR: I was literally shocked. I – I got into a women's art show – um, last year and it was the first time I had display some of my art. And it really made me feel like I was somebody again. Um, you know, because it was a whole new venture, you know. So – um, doi – sending to the – um, this

particular art show was my second time to put some of my stuff in, something. And it – it won. I'm like woah! Um, still shocked about that but okay. It gave me a sense of pride, it kind of renewed something in me, you know.

TL: Yeah.

DR: That had been kind of just put aside. And – um, so that's – that's kind of my story with that.

TL: Let's talk about the – um, about the Women's Art Exhibit that's going on now. Um, I'll have a picture of your – um, piece in the show notes to this podcast, but for the audience listening right now, can you sort of describe what your piece is?

DR: I have one piece in there – uh, I have a female dancing and maybe that's the one you have.

TL: Yep. In the red dress?

DR: And, yes.

TL: Yeah.

DR: Um, I had got invited to take some pictures at a – um, a production called *Our Voices of Many*. And – um, for some reason, I got, I had my camera stuck on this female who was dancing. Matter of fact there's just one of her pictures. I kind of enjoy seeing the twirls and – and I just laid on the shutter [clicking noises]. Anyway – um, that piece to me, the way she's stretching her hands out, it's like she's reaching for God and so I always refer to that as – um – uh, 'Part of Me' because I was reaching out like for help, reaching out for something. And so, it was like God took my hand, you know – uh, in the midst of all of the troubles I was going through and kind of just pulled me up. So that piece kind of represents – um, my, coming up out of my – uh, troubles, as – if you could say.

TL: Sure. What – um, what sort of things inspire your photography – uh, in general? Do you often look for movement, like in this dancer? Or what usually attracts you?

DR: I like – I like movement but I also enjoy landscapes –

TL: Mmm.

DR: Uh, very much. Living in – in, Pensacola – uh, we have a lot of water and, you know, living in this area, most of the time you have a lot of sky. There was one piece in there I had, went to my first Veteran's retreat down in Destin, on the seventh floor, I'm looking at the news and there – uh, and they says, 'there's a tornado'. Of course, silly me run and get my camera. [laughter]

TL: [Laughter]

DR: And go out and see if I could see a tornado. Which I did see the waterspout and above it there was a perfect eye form.

TL: Mmm!

DR: I took it, I took the picture and I was like – looked at it, and said 'Wow' you know, and I see things. What I do is I take pictures, I see one thing, but then when I look at them later, I see other things.

TL: Yeah.

DR: And that kind of like, gives me this, sense of 'okay, let me see what I'll make of this'. So that particular picture shows an eye, and I – I sent that one as well. I don't know if you have a copy of that – uh –

TL: No, I don't, I – I only have the one of the red dress.

DR: Yeah.

TL: Yeah.

DR: That's the only one they displayed.

TL: Mhmm.

DR: But – um, I sent several other pictures and they were pretty much landscapes.

TL: Yeah.

DR: Because what I did is, I went through my pictures and I says, 'okay what would go good on a VA wall, or what would' you know, and so I – I picked a lot of landscapes, sunrise. I like to get up early and get a sunrise, sunsets. Beautiful stuff, I like beauty. But what I find in photography, most times, you wind up taking a lot of pictures of people, which you know, I – as I go through my stuff, I see people and I see their expressions, and it's a lot – um, to – to see different expressions. But for me, my biggest thing is, and I had to learn a lesson from this, consumed in taking pictures. Especially, on a beautiful place – uh, where ever I travel I try to find beauty, and just you know, I get absorbed to the point that I have to have someone with me, because once I get my eye behind the camera, I – I forget about my whole surroundings. I just get absorbed into that. And it – and it – what it does for me, it blocks out everything else. Which that's maybe good, maybe bad, but it blocks out everything else, because for that time my mind is focused on that picture or that scene. And so, my pain, I forget it. You know, I just kind of block everything else out. I guess – I guess I got a one-track mind, I guess you could say.

TL: Do you find any, any disciplines or talents or skillsets, or anything you learned from the military influencing – uh, the way you approach art and photography?

DR: Yes, I do. The military had a thing, where they, you know, we strive for perfection. So, with photography I look at different pictures and I look for perfection. I look for content that will help somebody or – um, that's – I guess that's why I'm absorbed into landscapes, because you know, especially sunrise, how much peace it would give me. And like, with – with the military – um, at some point I had all peace. You know, never expected anything to happen, and then all of a sudden it did. But I had comfort. I – I enjoyed my military career. I really enjoyed it. So, trying to be that, working on a four-star staff, you know you got to be top-notch, kind of always, dress right dress. You know, and so, - um, I guess I had that expectancy, in everything else now, in photography. Even – even with dealing with people – um, there's still that – that want to be, that pride in my work.

TL: Yeah, I like that. Are you still – um, do you still – um, see any counseling for yourself?

DR: Yes.

TL: Yeah.

DR: Yes, I do.

TL: Is it –

DR: Yeah

TL: Where do you get that provided at?

DR: Well, I – uh, have two counselors. I have a counselor at the Veterans' – uh, at the VA here – um, and I also have a counselor at the Vets. I have a male counselor, and I have a female counselor. The Vet Center provides a more like group-like settings. And so, lots of times, you know, when I'm really going through something like that, I'll – and I need to talk, I can – um, I have regular counseling sessions with my VA counselor. But if I need additional time, he'll let me come in and we'll discuss what's going on, and he'll try to direct me or help me. One of my biggest things is failure. When I try to advance myself, or when I try to do something, and it doesn't go through, it – and that failure part of it, it – it gets to me, so. The counselor kind of motivates me and pushes me to let it go and I do. When I go to – uh, the Vet Center, we have – I have a counselor, Jeanine, there, and you know, she just talks to me. 'What's going on Deb' and you know, and – um, kind of lets you get it out, as opposed to what I was doing, just stuffing, stuffing, stuffing. And the longer you stuff all of these feelings, the more it makes you feel worse and causes some other sicknesses. So, I've learned that when I get really – um, bogged down, anxious, or just can't – feel like I can't go any further, going to – having a counselor to go talk to helps you to go forth, you know what I mean?

TL: I'm curious, with the – with the – with the type of counseling they can provide their approach to uh, to counseling you, is there – do you notice a difference in what you get from your female counselor versus what you get from your male counselor?

DR: Yes. The female counselor, she's over with the sexual trauma group, and she recognizes all of the stuff, you know, there's a group of us, that females – things that we go through as females. She can identify –

TL: Yeah

DR: closer. Now my male counselor, he really – he goes into it all. You know – uh, like I say, he deals more with – um, the overall counseling, as opposed to just the sexual trauma.

TL: Got it.

DR: The female counselor, she deals with, I'm in her sexual trauma group. So, we mostly deal with – um, what sexual trauma has done to me. As far as, I have this problem with – um, being – being non-submissive, I guess. People tend to – uh, wh – tend to use me, in a sense. And it was that part of me that I lost – um, that I don't have that fight – I don't know if I – I'm expla – I don't have that fight to, if – if – if you come to me with a fight, instead of me fighting, I walk away and just go shut down in my own shell.

TL: Hmm.

DR: And – and she tells me – um, instead of me blaming myself for what happened, she motivates me by saying 'it wasn't your fault, you know, don't let it take you down'. You know, she – she – she presses more at the- um, inner feelings that I'm having. Now my male counselor, he kind of stays – um, general, if I could say, overall. He deals with more of my pain – um, how am I dealing with my pain. If I have any problems at the VA, he looking at my file and he may say to me 'I saw you saw the doctor today, and what is that all about? What are you going through? How do you feel? How is it – how did they treat you? How do you feel' you know, whereas the female counselor more deals with what the sexual trauma does to me and how it shapes me.

TL: Debra, I'm – uh, a question I like to ask Veterans is – um, is there one or two Veterans in the Veteran community that you particularly admire, or look up to, or are excited about what they're doing in our community?

DR: I could say that I am really excited about what the Vet Center provides for the community.

TL: Okay.

DR: Because they always have some kind of outreach program, or they always have some kind of – um, sponsor, some kind of – um, wellness activities. Um, they even go as far as to do things like take the – the

Veterans out to – we went to horse therapy. Which, I never liked a horse, but I got – I got into that with my camera –

TL: [Laughter] Yeah.

DR: because I could look into the horse's eyes and take pictures and stuff. So even though I don't particularly care for animals, I was still able to relate – um, in the therapy. And then they go – um, like I said, photography therapy, it gives you an outing where you would go out in the community and – and – as a group of people. So, I – I – um, really think that a lot of people don't even know about the Vet Center and what they have to offer. But they're getting more out into the community and making themselves available for Veterans, um.

TL: Debra, I really appreciate you talking to my audience – um, about what you experienced, and about your artwork and – um, and what you're gaining from here -um, your counseling and – and most of all thank you for your service to our country.

DR: Thank you. Thank you as well.

[00:27:54] Music

[00:27:58] PSA:

Man 1: Getting out of the military I was missing this comradery.

Man 2: It's frustrating when you try and talk to people that don't understand.

Man 3: I still had the anger. I still had the addictions. But we didn't talk about that.

Woman: It came to a point where I was like, 'okay I really need to talk to somebody about this.

Man 4: Family more or less encouraged me to, you know, go – go to the VA.

Man 5: It's okay to go get help. It's okay to talk to people. Because it takes true strength to ask for help.

Man 6: Hear Veteran's real stories of strength and recovery, at maketheconnection.net [link to the Make the Connection website].

[00:28:25] Music

[00:28:30] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

TL:

As we continue through Women's History Month and spotlight some amazing women Veterans, I want to continue to mention great resources that VA offers them. First, there's the Center for Women Veterans. Led by Army Veteran Kayla Williams, the Center for Women Veterans continues to advocate for women in the Veterans space as it pertains to honoring their service and ensuring they receive the benefits and treatment they deserve at VA. Debra mentioned many times in her interview that she uses the local Vet Center for counseling. I've mentioned it many times and here it is again. This is a great resource provided by VA and one that is not talked about often enough. Vet Centers provide a number of benefits to Veterans including counseling and outreach. Vet Centers are available for combat Veterans and Veterans that have experienced military sexual trauma. Visit vetcenter.va.gov [link to the Vet Center webpage] for more information and to locate a Vet Center near you. Today's Veteran of the Day is Ralph Malachias Gaskin. He served in the Army as 11Bravo Infantry and 68Whiskey Health Care Specialist. He deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn. Thank you for your service, Malachias. To read his full writeup and to nominate your own Veteran of the Day, visit blogs.va.gov [link to VA blogs webpage]. That wraps up Episode 22. Thank you for listening. I know there are a lot of options out there for entertainment, so I appreciate you spending your time listening to these powerful Veterans' stories. Be sure to check us out on Facebook at facebook.com/veteransaffairs [link to VA's Facebook page] for more stories from our community. If you have any questions you'd like to have addressed on the show, tweet them to us using #vapodcast or email us, newmedia@va.gov. I'm Timothy Lawson signing off.

[00:30:06] Music Out

(Text Transcription Ends)