

This Week at VA

Episode # 38

Darren Sherrard – Army Veteran, VA Careers

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/39380/darren-sherrard-army-veteran/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] PSA:

Man:

My grandfather served in World War II. Spending time with him were the best memories of my life. I became a physician at VA because of my grandfather so I can help others like him. I can't imagine working with better doctors or a more dedicated staff. I'm fulfilling my life's mission with the help of my team and thanks to these Veterans. I'm proud to be a doctor at VA and proud to be honor my grandfather every day. Search VA careers to find out more.

[00:00:29] Music

[00:00:37] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Good morning everyone. Welcome to another episode of *This Week at VA*. I'm your host, Timothy Lawson. I'm sure many of you enjoyed celebrating our Independence Day this week, and I hope y'all had a safe holiday. I want to start today's show by telling you about the Veterans Innovation Partnership Fellowship. This is a one-year, paid opportunity for Veterans with graduate degrees that are interested in foreign affairs and global development careers. It's offered by the Department of State as a twelve-month, full-time employment beginning in the fall. Each fellow will receive a portfolio with assigned work commitments as a Foreign Affairs Officer or a Program Analyst. To learn more about the opportunity, and to begin the application process, go to vipfellowship.org [link to the Veterans Innovation Partnership Fellowship website], and be sure to apply soon as the window closes on July 17. And they're capping the number of applicants at 500 total, and that's only 250 for each job series. And so, once that cap hits they're closing it, whether or not it's – uh, before July 17. So, July 17 at the latest, but I highly recommend – uh, that you inquire if you're interested, again that's vipfellowship.org for more information.

Today's feature interview is with Darren Sherrard. Darren talks to us about joining the army, his twenty years of service, and his continued service to veterans here at VA. Enjoy
(musical interlude)

[00:02:09] Music

[00:02:13] INTERVIEW:

Darren Sherrard (DS): ...yeah, actually I think it is Sherrard. But in the South, we call it “Sherrad” –

TL: [Laughter]

DS: and – and my family gets mad if anybody allows “Sherrard.”

TL: Interesting. Okay. Well, very well. Darren “Sherrad;” you are the Associate Director for marketing and advertising. Um, you -uh, have a large part in the initiative that is VA – uh, Careers. Uh, but before we get to your involvement at VA – uh, I wanna talk about the thing that we all have in common – uh, here on this show, and that’s serving in the military and especially the decision to do so. Can you bring us back to the day that you decided to join the United States military?

DS: Uh, that was a long time ago in 1983. Uh, actually, I – I was a DEP referral, a delayed-entry program referral, from my good friend. And – uh, he had just joined, and he introduced me to his recruiter and asked me what I was gonna do when I graduate. And before I could say go to college, I started thinkin’ about what was I really gonna do. And I didn’t have a plan, so I talked to him. And – um, next thing you know, I was in the army. Uh, my – in – at one of the Fourth of July events, a Golden Knight—in a small town—jumped out for our Fourth of July – uh, picnic in the town. It was one Golden Knight. He hit the ground, and he pulled that maroon beret out and put it on his head. And every girl I ever dreamed of, was runnin’ over and ga-gaing at him. And –

TL: [Laughter]

DS: yeah, that’s what I want – that’s what I want to do. So, I joined to be – uh, to – to be Airborne and go the 82nd Airborne. And they said, “well, what job do you want?” I said, “I wanna be airborne.” So, ended up bein’ a forward observer, and I did get to go 82nd with- uh, Airborne option. Been here and did – did my twenty years.

TL: Yeah, twenty years. Um, I’m sure plenty happened in those two decades, but do – do you have a – a story or experience that you like to recall on often? Or something that maybe you think may be the epitome of your time in?

DS: I think one of the, the biggest things that I learned is I was just really fortunate with great leaders. When I was – I – when I was in the 82nd, I ended up going to Panama. And when I left there, I got in a little trouble, and I went to Fort Campbell. And my platoon sergeant from Panama was there. And he helped me work through that so that it didn't end my career. And then later on, I got drafted into recruiting. And the non-commissioned officer that ran the office in Mesquite, Texas, was a great man from Louisiana. And – and he taught me how to do something that I had no idea or desire to do. And I ended up – uh, finishing – staying in it, and being very successful at it. Um, and then there was – there was another time when – uh, my sergeant major—I'd had – uh, some issues with – uh, some family, personal problems and – and my immediate supervisor was looking to – um, get rid of me as far as just too many – too much of a personal issue. And – and that – uh, actually he's my sergeant major now, but – uh, he was a first sergeant, and he – he responded back to him to, "Let's take care of him while we're in a position to do so instead of kicking him while he's down." And – and I learned of that, but I can see how leaders throughout my career guided me and helped me – uh, until I retired. And then, of course, that – that led me into my next job of healthcare recruiting when I got out of the Army.

TL: Yeah, I – I think that – that is such a great example of – uh, leadership that – that is seen, not only, you know, especially in the military, of – um, being able to look at a service member who isn't in the best spot. And, instead of taking – uh, you know – you – options as a leader and you could discipline them in a way that makes it seem like you're giving them proper consequence for their actions. Or you can – um, you can, you know, make sure that they are aware of the – of where they're at and why they're there but take the step that nurtures them and helps them get back on the right foot.

DS: Yeah, it – it was – it was really a great lesson in empathy and – and compassion that I learned. Um, I'm not your gent – gentler, kinder first sergeant, but – uh, but he sure taught – taught me – taught me empathy from that.

TL: Yeah. So, you got out after twenty years. Um, were – did you feel like you were ready, that would have been, what 2003?

DS: 2003. Yeah.

TL: Yeah. Did you – did you feel like you were prepared?

DS: Uh, I did, I did. I really felt so. Um, I went to the transitional classes at Fort Knox, Kentucky. And they started off with, you're gonna take a thirty percent pay cut, and you're kinda startin' over. So, don't go out there expecting the moon. And I was a little disappointed because, being in recruiting, I had been recruited for other positions within – um, sales and – and recruiting positions in the private sector. I also had an opportunity from someone I knew, to go partner with them in running a nurse staffing company. So, I was really fortunate that I had a job lined up, equal to or better than what I had at that time. I realize that doesn't happen to everybody, but I do – um, I do feel that bein' realistic in – in what our experience and education is and – uh, taking the steps...you know, we – we chart our own path. We're not destined – uh, from what the Transition Assistance Office tells us. So – uh, you know, I just – I see examples all the time of – of senior non-commissioned officers getting out, officers getting out, and doing very well or doing very poorly. And a lot of it has to do with – uh, just what it was in the military, make – you know, it's your career, what you make out of it. So, that – that – that was – that was kind of my biggest thing getting out. Um, now, when I learned five years later in 2008, when the market – um, turned around, is that I was not prepared.

TL: Hmm...

DS: I had a ton, a ton of experience. But I didn't have an education. So, I was forty years old – uh, begin – forty-two I think, beginning to do interviews – uh, for positions that my competitors had college degrees and master's, and – and I didn't have those. And so, it – it – it was an eye opener. I also had to learn how to uh, job hunt – uh, and – and to network and – and everything kind of from scratch. So, I kinda did my transition five years after I got out. And I found the – the position that I'm in now was – uh, healthcare recruitment marketing and advertising. And it was about a year after Katrina, in New Orleans. And, as my father said, there's probably not one person that had the background exactly the same as that job description. And, at that time, I would imagine not a lot applied to go to New Orleans after Katrina. So – um, fortunate for me, I don't think I had a lot of competition. And being a service-

connected disabled veteran, with a hiring preference – the – uh, I was – I was picked up for it. And been here ever since.

TL: Yeah. It's – it's interesting that you...um, I think that's – that's a story I don't think we hear enough, and it clearly has to happen, is someone who transitioned initially well, but then, when it came to a career transition later on, faced difficulties. Uh, and maybe, I don't know if maybe they're more difficult at that point because you don't have the – uh, I don't know the right word for it. I wanna say the – the luxury of being in transition, if that makes sense. Um, or being between jobs, when it makes sense. You're sort of – um, I think, the pressure to – uh, to take the next step is – maybe weighs a little bit more. Um, have you, you didn't, have you tried – uh, you said you didn't have an education. Did you ever go back to get that education?

DS: I did. Kind of a couple of things about that is – is technically, you know, when I left that – uh, private company, I was technically unemployed. I did have a severance package, and I had some cashed-in vacation time. Um, so, I went and saw the Veterans Service Officer at the county office. He referred me ov – he – he reminded me that I was unemployed and that I should go see the – um, vocab/rehab counselor cause I would be likely eligible for that. And so, I went and talked to him, and I shared with him my experience, and I'd had about maybe sixty credit hours through this-and-that while I was in the army. But they had a program, I learned of a program called Matriculation, where they evaluate your skills, education, experience, - uh, and they can accept you into a master's program without a bachelor's degree. So, I applied at TCU in Texas – uh, and I ended up not getting accepted for that. And after I got the job, I – uh, in New Orleans, I moved down and applied at Tulane. And I got accepted into their executive MBA program. Unf – uh, however, since I was employed, vocab/rehab – uh, was not an option anymore, and so I didn't go there. So, but I did end up using the 9-11 GI Bill. I had twenty-three months – uh, of that – um, so I got seventy-percent benefits. And – and I went to – um, online college – uh, and finished up with a bachelor's in applied management. And currently I'm enrolled again into – in workin' on an MBA.

TL: Wow, that's – uh, that's pretty cool. I – I – um, where are you pursuing the MBA again?

DS: Uh, at Liberty University.

TL: Liberty. Okay, cool. So, you got, in your position you're in now here at VA, in 2008. What – what is it about the – uh, actually let's – let's – uh, let's rewind a little – two – two questions that I – uh, I kinda glossed over. Um, the first, during – during your transition, I mean you said you had a smooth one – um, did you experience any sort of emotional crisis that a lot of veterans do when they're – when they separate from the military, either through identity or other transitional – uh, issues maybe outside of your career?

DS: Well, you know, as – when you asked me to do this, I thought about how honest I would be, and open. And that, you know, that – it was. It was a big thing. Uh, just as an example, 'bout '05 – uh, I was divorced. And I'd been married to – for sixteen years, and I found myself a year after getting out of the army, divorced and raisin' a couple of kids. Um, and so, my life really changed. And then it wasn't until I got to the VA and I came here, but for the last five – for the five years after I got out, I had – uh, some issues with the, like, panic attacks and anxiety – uh, that a lot of our Veterans experience now. It – uh, it was definitely a new thing. So, I guess my point to it is, is once you slow down your mind and your body – um, things from 1985 can come back to say hello, and if you haven't dealt with them, you'll be dealing with them at some point. And so – um, I ran to the VA, and – uh, they – they helped me out and – and helped me figure out what was going on and – and – uh, helped me find a way to where, you know, I – I can still serve – uh, while still taking care of myself.

TL: Yeah. And then – um, then – then your – uh, a discovery of a renewed purpose. How long did it – did it take you – did you get that with that first job right out of the military, or – or was it later on?

DS: Well, you know, I was a really good recruiter. And even better than me is – is my soldiers. I was a – uh, a good recruiting first sergeant. And we won – we – we won a lot of awards, and we could call it WOOD. And so, I was really excited to get out and, instead of WOOD, I wanted to earn money. And so, I got into that – uh, position, and I had Dallas Cowboys season tickets and a fancy car and an expense account and – and bonuses, and it – it was, it was nice. It was – uh, it was – it was good. But then, you know, it's kinda tied to the economy, the m – the market I – the industry I was in is tied to the economy. So, when, in 2008, when that slowed down, - uh, the bottom kinda fell out on the industry we were in. And so, I high tailed it out of there.

TL: I have a – I have a friend – uh, a non-Veteran friend, that is in – uh, in nurse recruiting. And he – uh, he has enjoyed how lucrative that can be. So – um, I – uh, am a little familiar with what you’re talking about in – in that lifestyle. Um, the – uh, so VA, 2008. Uh, what was your – was it this – uh, was it this – it wasn’t this position, right? It was – it was this side of VA though, is that right?

DS: So, I – I – I’ll fill ya in there.

TL: Yeah.

DS: So, in 2008, we had a – uh, there was a Healthcare Recruitment and Retention Office. And there weren’t – there were not really any national recruiters, or – or – and there was VA Careers, but it was a very small operation—no social media – uh, even before VA had Facebook and Twitter and all that. So, we were – I – I was able to come in and – and grow the program. And we added all the social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, we’re up on LinkedIn and Glass Door – uh, we went from ninety-percent print advertising to hundred percent digital. Uh, and those – and it was about the time President Obama came in, and he was very pro-digital and electronic and no printing. So – uh, we took all of the mass quantities of printed brochures, and we made them digital brochures and we stopped printing. And so, we took a lot of the recruitment marketing that was very manual and very paper-oriented, and we put it online. And we’ve expanded our – our reach ten-fold for no less money. And so, that’s just some really good stuff. And then – uh, and then we started growin’ national recruiters to where every (inaudible) has a – a National Healthcare Recruiting Consultant. And I support them, in addition to VA Careers promotions, I support them with – uh – uh, very specific marketing programs and – uh, and tools for them. And so, it’s been an exciting time. And any time something happens – uh, anywhere in the news – uh, we – we’re usually one of the first calls of – of we need to turn on the faucet to get leads goin’ to the – whatever the area of the country it is. Uh, and – and we – we’re able to do that very well because the VA *is* a preferred employer. And while – and – and a lot of times when the challenges come it’s because we’re so – it’s so competitive – uh, that it – you really have to, you know, you really have to be competitive in – in your application process in – in order to get through.

TL: Yeah. For – uh, for those that are listening that may have – uh, either listening intently because they’re interested in a career in VA, how does one make their resume, their application competitive?

DS:

Well, the first thing you do is you go to [VAcareers.va.gov](https://vacareers.va.gov) [link to the VA career website]. That is our career website. And you identify the How-to-Apply and the Tips. And you become a student. Um, you know when I started applying for jobs with, for the federal government, I just had a resume, I uploaded stuff, and – and I just applied for everything. But that, it doesn't work. I learned that, rather than a shot-gun approach, you have to take a sniper approach. So, if you take a look at my his – uh, job history and experience and compare it to the original job announcement of what they were looking for, it's almost identical. And, and so when you find a job that – that you're qualified for, you know, not – not because of education or – or because we think so, but because when you read that it's like exactly what you've done, then you have to take your resume and you have to adapt it to the job announcement. And what I mean by that is, is this is 2017, so everything is ran digitally. And so, the keywords are plugged in to the system. Uh, you know, the VA gets over a million applications annually. And we have to hire about 44,000. So, when you look at those numbers, you can see, one pe – you know, individuals sitting around tryin' to pick through a million applications would be very challenging. So – so, the first step is to be able to have the – have the system pick up your skills and your experience that the position needs. And so, once you get – once you do that—and I, you know, where I used to do an application an hour, you know, I would, you know, in reality, you can spend a week – a week preparing to apply for one position – uh, that you're really – really – uh, qualified for. Um, for Veterans, VA for Vets at VA.gov, there's assistance there. A lot of the Veterans Service Officers – uh, and – and companies host – um, classes and – and different things to help with resumes and, you know, I – I was fortunate being in recruiting that I kind of had a taste of that. But, for the most part, when an eighteen-year-old boy joins the military and gets out at forty, he doesn't have a clue how to complete a resume or to translate it or many things. And – and it's up to us to learn that and adapt that for the next position that we're goin' after.

TL:

Yeah. I think one thing, and I bring this up every time I talk about jobs – uh, like for Veterans seeking employment – um, one thing I think Veterans don't do – uh, well enough is describe how good of a follower they are. Like we – I think veterans are often taught to harp on their leadership and – um, I don't know what, I don't know how this pertains exactly to how VA analyzes – uh, applications and resumes and such. But just in general, when Veterans are – um, applying for employment, there always harping on how much of a leader they are—how many Marines or soldiers they led—uh, when, you know, every position

requires both leadership and the ability to follow. I think that – um, Veterans often forget that aspect of their value to an organization.

DS:

I agree. And, you know, it – it – it made me think of an actual hiring event we had many years ago. And I- uh, 'm not gonna share the individual's name, but he comes up to the table and he didn't like the way things were going. So, he began to let me know about it. And as I looked at his resume, I saw that he had – he was a lieutenant colonel out of the Army. And – and I tried to be nice for a minute until I told him, "Well, you're probably not gonna get hired, you're probably not getting an interview because they don't want to hire – work with you. I know I don't." And it was because the aggression and the mannerisms that he was portraying – uh, were kind of forceful. And if you take a look at the civilian population, most of them are not prepared for one of us to be up in their face. And so, we have to make sure that our communication skills and our mannerisms and our – um, body-language is comparable and relatable at the employer we're lookin' to be with.

TL:

Yeah. I think, and the – the easiest – easiest way to cheat that—if you're listening and you're sort of unsure of, you know, if you – if you identify that in you and you don't know how to adjust—if you even simply mimic the mannerisms of the person you're talking to, you will already seem more – um, they will already – they will subconsciously become more comfortable with you. And that's – that's actually a body – a body-language behavior analysis proven thing, that if you just mimic the behavior and mannerisms of the persons you're talking to, they will naturally think or not think – well not think better of you, but be more comfortable around you.

DS:

Absolutely. And, you know, and just as a follow up to that, the – the gentleman appreciated me telling him that. He – he really did take a look at it, and he does work for the VA today – uh, and, you know, never had a problem like that. Sometimes, you know, it's a different environment, and we just have to reprogram – uh, and re-look at certain things. One of the things that I, you know, and that's one of the values that I got out of college. I never really – uh, thought that I needed to go, and I didn't – uh, I didn't really see a lot of value. But what I did learn, is I learned how everybody else is. So, and what I mean by that, is in the military I knew how to be – be and hang out and what personalities in the Army were like. But I wasn't real used to other, like, college stu – college professionals – uh, in methods that they'd been

taught and environments they'd been taught it. And – and it really gave me a little insight as to – uh, you know, why someone's so picky on formatting of a business paper, you know, where I may not think it's a big deal, the content is. It's just, you know, it's – it's just a different education and learning form that. And so, I do think it's, today, if – if we don't want a blue-collar job we have – we pretty much need to make sure we get our college degree. And I encourage people to – uh, think college, think healthcare, and then think VA because – uh, healthcare, you know, we have probably ten of the – top ten most critical jobs in America at VA. And there's no better place as a v=Veteran to work than taking care of our brothers and sisters.

TL: Yeah. Um, a couple more questions for you, Darren. First um, the, obviously there's parallels between – uh, what you did in – in the Army and then – uh, what you're doing now with recruiting and what not. But, what other skillset or – or talent or discipline did you get in the military that you find yourself applying to today that's – uh, contributing to your success?

DS: Uh, the biggest thing is just – uh, never quit and time management. You know – uh, I have a – you have a gut. And that gut tells you to be busy and to take that hill and to do your best and to win and to keep goin'. Uh, and I've always had that, so as I get older, you know, I keep think, you know, I keep looking at how am I gonna continue to grow. uH, And that's one of my challenges here is what's my next step – uh, because I wanna grow. And I think when someone comes in to a position and they want to learn to master it and they want to be on time and they wanna show up every day, - uh, I think that's one of the be – better soft skills that – that we – that the military teaches us is just that – um, our employers can count on us and our customers and patients as well.

TL: And then finally – um, what – what do you – what do you tell the people, like why should someone want to work at VA? Why should someone want, I know you said it's – it's – it's a highly sought out employer, but to those that are maybe on the fence or – or just now – just now – um, considering VA, what's, I mean, what's the real pull? What's the benefit for working for the Department?

DS: And it is, it's – it's multiple. It's usually – uh, different for everyone; most people may join the VA they don't do so because of the mission.

They join because they needed a job, they – they – they were lookin’ for educational benefits, a good retirement plan, a – a good – uh, a good salary. Uh, you know, a lot, VA is a big – a large employer in a lot of the communities. Uh, a lot of – a lot of the healthcare providers that come into VA, they don’t – they don’t really learn and – and live that mission until once they get here. And once they get in – uh, we find that the (inaudible) and the Veterans and the relationships formed – uh, is why – is why they stay. And so, it’s hard to get – uh, somebody to leave once they have that. Now, Veterans in – in non-healthcare positions, a lot of them do wanna work at the VA for the mission and also because we as Veterans we can do anything and we can fix anything and – and if there’s something broke, let me at – let me at it, I’ll fix it. And so – uh, it’s, it really is a – a competitive position. And so, why – but what I would tell someone, you know, not so much as why they wanna work here, but if they do how to get here. I used to tell people, when I put people in the Army, is they would have this list of demands. And my question to them is, “Are you joining – it – do you want to be a truck driver, or do you want to be in the Army? Do you want to be in Europe, or do you want to be state side?” So, there’s a lot of things we can get, and because of that I would tell people not to limit their choices. And in VA it’s exactly the same. Take a look at Big Springs, Texas. Look in South Dakota, Montana. Look in these rural locations that there’s not a lot of competition. A lot of the positions are professional and require degrees. Um, and so, there may be more opportunities there. So, if – if you really wanna work at the VA, you can’t just focus on the one that’s down the street from you if – if you’re in a highly desired area like San Diego because everybody wants to work there. And so, but there’s a – there’s a lot of opportunity, like I said. We hire 44,000 a year; most of them are gonna be in healthcare. Um, so, if you haven’t got your college yet, I suggest goin’ that route.

TL: Alright, Darren thank you so much for joining me. Thank you for – uh, sharing your story and time in the service and working at VA. I really appreciate that contributions here that you have at VA Careers and – and elsewhere.

DS: Oh, it’s – uh, my privilege and – and – and honor to do so. And I appreciate your time and allowing me to talk about it. I’m gonna have to go drink a cup of coffee and reminisce about old times now.

[00:32:38] PSA:

Woman:

There are nearly 2 million women veterans who served and deserve the best care anywhere. VA is dedicated to meeting the unique needs of all women veterans. VA offers comprehensive primary care, specialty care, mental health care, and women's health specialty care, such as advanced breast and gynecological care, maternity care, and infertility treatments. At each of the 168 VA Medical Centers nationwide, a Women Veterans Program Manager is available to advise, advocate, and coordinate care for women Veterans. Women Veterans who are interested in receiving care at VA should call the Women Veterans Call Center at 1-855-VAWomen or 1-855-829-6636. Or contact the nearest VA Medical Center and ask for the Women Veterans Program Manager. For more information about benefits and other services for women Veterans, visit www.va.gov/womenvet [link to Center for Women Veterans website].

[00:33:31] Music

[00:33:35] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

TL:

The VA Careers website is dedicated to recruiting the finest healthcare employees to – to care for our veterans. You can visit vacareers.va.gov to learn more about working at VA, specific career options such as physician, nurse, and leadership; and discover availability and geographic locations that are important to you. Today's Veteran of the Day is Army Veteran Samuel V. Wilson. Samuel served in World War II, he did intel in Germany at the height of the Cold War, and he deployed to Vietnam. Samuel passed away last month at the age of ninety-three. We honor his service. To read Samuel's full write-up and to nominate your own Veteran of the Day, visit blogs.va.gov [link to the VA blog page]. That does it for episode thirty-eight. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen. If you would like to recommend any veteran to be featured here on the podcast, simply email us newmedia@va.gov. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:34:34] Music out

(Text Transcript Ends)