

Shifting Focus

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In June of 2010, I walked across the stage at William Ball Stadium behind Exeter High School in Exeter, NH, with a fresh high school diploma in my hand and aspirations of being a kinesiologist at the forefront of my mind. It had always been drilled into my brain as a child that college was the only real way I could be successful or make something of myself, to the point that my father promised I would get a free convertible upon graduation. So, off I went to the University of Southern Maine. The day I moved in, my roommate moved to a different dorm and I spent the entire year alone trying to fit into new groups. While I found this extremely hard and not at all what I was looking for when it came to the college experience, I knew it was necessary to look into transferring to another school.

The next fall I found myself enrolled and living at Southern New Hampshire University with a new roommate. But my school wasn't the only change; I also changed my major. I didn't think I was smart enough to become a kinesiologist so I changed my major to psychology because for some reason I thought it would be easier. Either way, I continued on with my general education courses, and as I did so, I became increasingly more frustrated sitting in classrooms not being able to pay attention and not making money. By the second semester of my second year, I knew I needed a change. I was paying for college myself and I wasn't willing to continue working full-time while in school just to make money to live and then having to pay for school as well. That summer of 2012 I struggled severely with either letting my dad down and leaving school or continue doing something that makes me miserable.

For me, the answer was clear that it was time to shift my direction in my path and I trusted that my decisions would lead me somewhere better in the future. I'll be honest thought, I had no idea where that might lead. That November, I filled out an online questionnaire about the New Hampshire National Guard, and within the next few weeks, I found myself sitting at the recruiter's desk outside of UNH. I spoke to him about what brought me there and what my future opportunities might be with the Army. By Friday, December 12, 2012, I was standing with my right hand raised at the Boston Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS), swearing into the greatest Army in the world. My dad didn't know (he was in Las Vegas for work) until I sent him a picture of myself with my hand raised and explained to him that I

was the newest member of the U.S. Army. I was excited, anxious, and had absolutely zero idea of what I had gotten myself into.

In April of 2013, I shipped off to basic training at Fort Jackson, SC where I learned more about myself than ever before. When I first showed up, I quickly found out that the National Guard wasn't just on weekends. We had to complete all of the same training as active duty. I was suddenly anxious beyond belief. Over the next eight weeks, I went through hardcore training, both mentally and physically. I fired a weapon for the first time (on my 21st birthday), I lived with thirty females of different races and ages, and I was broken down to the absolute lowest I have ever been. But, this also allowed me to be built back up stronger than I had been before and I learned about different cultures and different ways people were raised, and I learned what it means to be a part of a brother/sisterhood. Perhaps most importantly, I learned what it means to serve my country.

Unfortunately, I didn't graduate basic training. I sprained my ankle on the final field test, which was a 12-mile ruck march with 40 pounds on my back. This simple sprain caused me to fail my physical fitness test resulting in not being eligible to graduate. So, my mission became to guard the bathrooms at the stadium where the rest of my battalion was marching across the field for graduation. The only silver lining was that it was the first time in my entire life that I saw my father and mother in space. But that's a different story for another day.

After completing my bathroom protection detail, I packed up my belongings and was shipped to Fitness Camp. This was where Soldiers who were deemed worthy of remaining in the military but didn't graduate basic training were either rehabilitated to be Army-proficient or were sent home with their separation papers in hand. Luckily, I recovered from my sprained ankle and trained hard enough to make a quick come-back and graduated from fitness camp within two weeks, which led me to advanced training of my job specialty – human resources. I enjoyed advanced training immensely and was excited to be able to take care of other Soldiers by using my administrative capabilities to ensure that they were paid correctly, set up with savings accounts, administer leave, and handled any other situations that may arise.

Upon graduation from advanced training, I was shipped back to New Hampshire with instructions to report to my unit the following month. On Friday, November 3, 2024, I reported to my unit for the first time in Plymouth, NH, and stood in formation with 70 other soldiers ready to take on Drill Weekend. Throughout the day, I was introduced to my chain of command, signed for the gear, and learned what a weekend in the National Guard looked like. When the service day was over, all of us went to the hotel nearby to our respective rooms to get out of uniform and into comfortable clothes so we could head across the street to the local restaurant to grab dinner. After dinner, we all made our way back to the hotel to our respective rooms. Little did I know, I was followed by another Soldier who held the door open while I tried to shut it behind me. This is when my life changed. I was sexually assaulted.

The next morning, I showed up to formation and didn't know what to do. I kept quiet because I didn't want to cause any trouble and I didn't think that anyone would believe the new and only female in the unit. A year passed. A deployment passed. Then I was asked about my mental health and I knew something was wrong with me, but I didn't know what. I took the Army up on the offer of therapy, and it was then that I broke and everything came undone. I explained the details of what happened, and the therapist convinced me to report it. He was consequently kicked out of the military, permanently. I bore my soul in my sessions. I was honest. I was raw. I was slowly understanding the weight of what had happened to me. These sessions also helped me recognize my strengths and helped me to build confidence that I never had before. Most importantly, I realized that I could either let what happened to me control me, or I could find a way to do something positive with my trauma. The first thing I changed was my narrative about myself and to those around me. For instance, my social media became more positive, focusing on ensuring my audience knew that they weren't alone with whatever they might be going through. I also focused on spreading awareness about the importance of mental health.

Soon, it became impossible for me to show up to National Guard weekends, as this is the same place as my assault. I ended up getting out of the military because of this with absolutely no plan. Luckily, my background in administrative work paid off and I quickly found myself a job with an

insurance company. Over the next three years, I continued to throw myself into therapy, tried to understand how my brain worked, and how the trauma had affected me. After being the complaint department personnel for three years, I decided to shift my path once again. I needed something entirely new, such as staring at walls for ten hours a day. Enter my career in taping. I joined the tapers union to be a taper (the person who closes all the seams between drywall with plaster) and absolutely loved it. It was cathartic and exactly what I needed to begin processing what had happened to me. Sixty hours a week staring at a wall allowed me to think about what I wanted to do with my trauma experience. I knew there was one thing I didn't want to do; allow myself to be a victim. Then COVID came out of nowhere and shut down everything, including Boston and all of my job sites. A two-week quarantine turned into months and then a year, and I found myself increasingly impatient to get back to work and out of the house.

When COVID finally ended I applied for a job that I had found that asked for an entry-level construction worker. The pay was right and I was willing to learn. Not to mention, my work ethic was unmatched. I applied and got the job. I worked this job for a little under a year, still trying to figure out what my end-goal was. I loved designing spaces, but I knew I needed to help people in a different way.

Then I found the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA). I joined this organization because I liked riding my motorcycle, loved helping veterans in the community through fundraising, and really began to find my family through this group. Through my travels within the CVMA, I met a man named Mike. He is a retired Sergeant Major (the highest enlisted rank in the military), and he told me that I would be a great fit for the company he was working with called United Veteran. I trusted him and I applied. United Veteran focuses on helping Veterans through the Veteran Affairs (VA) claims process, which is right in line with what I wanted to be doing, which is to help make Veteran's lives easier and provide them with the benefits that they deserve.

I started my job as a case manager at United Veteran in August of 2022 and continue to work there today. In the meantime, I also increased my participation with the CVMA. I knew that I would get

out of it what I put into it. The camaraderie that I felt from the organization was unmatched by anything I had experienced in my life, and I was all in. In the summer of 2022, I assisted the CVMA of NH in hosting our regional rally which consisted of over 400 Veterans all coming together for a back-to-basics weekend of motorcycling and brotherhood. Seeing that my efforts allowed all of these Veterans to forget their ailments and enjoy each other's company added fuel to my fire of wanting to help Veterans. This event also led to my appointment as the first State Public Relations Officer for New Hampshire CVMA, which I felt was my first chance to really use my voice for something good and to make change. Every meeting, every event, and every ride that I attended and spoke at, I talked about mental health, breaking the stigma, and different resources for Veterans and the community.

Another important thing happened during this time was that I was determined to be 100% permanently disabled through the VA, which opened me up to a program that allowed me to get paid to go to school. I got excited about this possibility and immediately applied to schools. The day I received the congratulations letter from UNH, I cried. I used to go to UNH Hockey games with my dad as a kid, I started my military journey on the UNH campus, and now I was able to pursue my bachelor's degree from UNH. This was a dream come true.

Right before I started my first semester as a Professional Communications major, I got the news that the Chaplain from my deployment had taken his life. I was heartbroken, I was angry, and I knew we as a society had to do better. Twenty-two Veterans taking their lives every day is too many. Honestly, one is too many. His death pushed me further in the direction of using my degree to help Veterans. I decided that I wanted to become the public relations specialist for my current company, or any Veteran company focused on helping the community. I wanted to be a voice that Veterans could recognize, trust, and use to help them improve their life. I also began to realize that a bachelor's degree would be necessary to do what I really wanted to accomplish. I had done my time learning in the real world by being in the military at a young age, and now at 30 years old, I was ready to learn differently and was hoping that my college experience would be different than it was three years prior.

My ultimate goal is to travel the country with a truck and trailer offering Veterans from every corner of the United States free care. Not professional care, but care from another Veteran who has experience with military trauma and wants to listen. Not only can I listen (and not be tied to a professional organization) but I can provide different benefit options for them to look into, or put them in contact with professionals who can assist them further. My degree in professional communications will aid me in communicating in productive ways with Veterans and will also help with my ability to reach out to other organizations for assistance, support, or sponsorships. I look forward to continuing down this path toward helping Veterans on a wider scale. And no matter what, I now know that regardless of how many times I may need to shift my path, I will be okay.