



Perspective / Opinion

Making a Researcher Out of Me: My Journey of Working with Veterans

By Leslie Ruffalo, PhD

I started my career at MCW fourteen years ago as a Research Coordinator in the Department of Family and Community Medicine. The very first project of which I was a part was called POWER (Posts Working for Veterans Health), led by Dr. Jeff Whittle. I was a part of an amazing team that included Kristyn Ertl, Dr. Kathlyn Fletcher, Dr. Jeff Morzinski, Nancy Wilke (retired VA Occupational Therapist), and fifty-eight Veteran Service Organization posts throughout Southeastern Wisconsin. For readers unfamiliar with “Veteran speak,” a “post” is a local unit of a Veteran Service Organization such as an American Legion post, a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) post, or a Marine Corps League. Membership within posts often skews toward older Veterans.

The goal of the project was to implement a peer-led educational intervention focused on blood pressure reduction, disease self-management, and lifestyle change. Our team followed up our POWER project with another peer-led project called MOVE OUT, which was an extension of the VA’s MOVE! program (Moving Veterans Everywhere). MOVE OUT was a community-based intervention that built upon the MOVE! Program by adding peer support, convenient access to educational sessions, exercise opportunities at local posts (as opposed to the VA), and a variety of scheduling options (e.g., morning and evenings). In total, we trained thirty-four peer leaders across twelve Veteran-specific community sites.

Working with Veterans taught me about Veteran culture

The reason that I share this background is to highlight how truly special and immersive these two research projects were for me. I learned so much about Veteran culture. During the years that I worked on the projects, I spent many evenings and weekends traveling to posts throughout southeastern Wisconsin. We trained Veteran peer mentors, we exercised with the Veterans, we conducted observation studies, and (most importantly) we got to know the Veterans at our sites.

All the posts and the peer leaders that I worked with are memorable and some of my favorite memories include:

- **My mall walkers:** My group of mall walking Veterans that met every Monday morning (yes, “mall walking”!) As I walked the halls of Southridge Mall with my Vets and often their significant others, they shared many stories of their times in the military with me. Some of their stories were sad for me to hear, some were hilarious. But, in listening to their many, many stories, it became clear to me how much they enjoyed sharing their stories with an interested listener and what a great history lesson it turned out to be for me!
- **My group of Veterans from the Hales Corner/Greendale American Legion Posts:** I loved my time with this group; they were so engaged and committed to getting healthier. I had a consistent group of about ten to twelve attendees that showed up every session. They were eager for our educational topic and were always ready to ask questions and share their personal wellness examples from their lives. And they were always ready to exercise! We had a DVD and projector at this site, and we would pop in an exercise DVD and go for it! I was always impressed by their effort, and we had fun chatting and getting to know each other during these moments. As a group, we grieved for losses that were experienced by our group members, we celebrated new grandchildren born, and I’ll never forget how excited this group was to throw me a surprise wedding party two weeks before my wedding. Simply put, we did life together.
- **My American Legion group in New Berlin:** This group carries such a special place in my heart. We held our sessions right before they conducted their official post business meetings. This group always invited me to stay for that meeting, and I often did. I enjoyed hearing about the activities and events that they were organizing to support their fellow comrades. I learned about the significance of the red poppy sales that I had often seen outside my local grocery store. I learned about the post’s commitment to sending their World War II Veterans on an Honor Flight. I learned about the fundraising efforts that were done to support local youth scholarships. I always left the meeting being moved by the dedication to community service. And, as with my other two groups that I mentioned, I made friendships.

It’s amazing to think that well over a decade has passed since my humble research beginnings and work with Veterans. In the years that passed, I transitioned into a faculty role, and I’ve been able to PI and Co-I additional research projects focused on Veteran health and wellness.

Establishing the Veterans Treatment Court and Dryhooch

In a recent project, I was able to partner with the Milwaukee Veterans Treatment Initiative to work together to establish Milwaukee County’s first ever Veterans Treatment Court which is a

specialty court designed to divert Veterans from the traditional justice system into a court that focuses on the unique needs of Veterans.

I've also had the privilege of working with Dryhootch of America to create and launch a formalized peer mentor training program (alongside Drs. Zeno Franco and Katinka Hooyer). The training program was developed by a multidisciplinary team that brought together perspectives from education experts, mental health providers, physicians, humanities experts and, most importantly, Veterans. While developing the training, I have so many vivid memories of the back-and-forth exchanges between the academicians and Veterans to make sure that our product was one that was met with educational rigor/polish and yet highly elevated the Veteran "voice."

My partnership with Dryhootch continues today and their organization is one that I will always be ready to support. In fact, I had the esteemed honor of hooding Robert Curry (Dryhootch Founder and President) as he received his Honorary Doctorate from MCW two years ago.

All of these experiences have played a role in shaping me into the community-engaged health researcher that I am today. My Veteran research partners taught me about military history, they taught me the true meaning of sacrifice, they taught me how to be community-engaged, they taught me about service, and they taught me about friendship. As we celebrate and honor Veterans Day this year, I'm reflecting on the years with a grateful heart for the Veterans that I've come to know and for all our men and women in uniform (past, present, and future). Thank you for your sacrifices.

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