

OUR 2023
MAGAZINE EDITION

CHICAGO VETERANS

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RECOGNIZING AGENTS OF CHANGE IN OUR COMMUNITY



BUSINESS LEADERS
CEOS, FOUNDERS
AND MORE!

RECOGNIZING 23 VETERANS IN 2023



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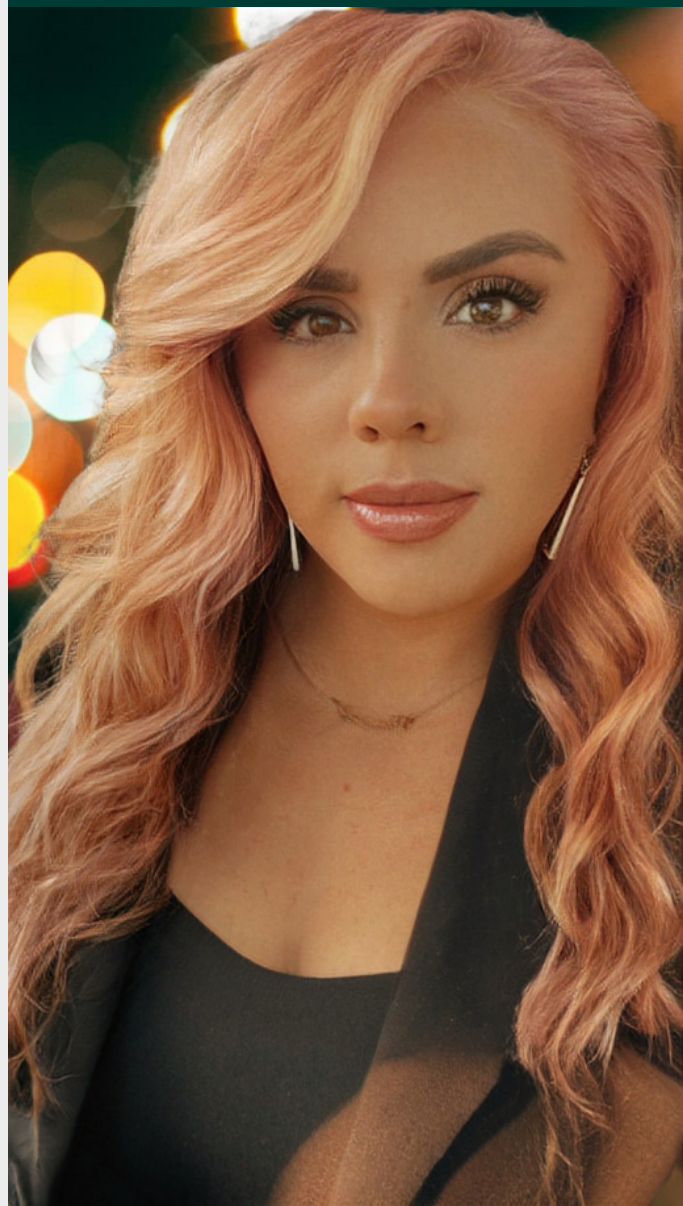


LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

We recognize that our Veteran community is filled with change-makers, innovators, pacesetters, visionaries and trailblazers. In the first edition of our 23 in 2023, you will read the stories of 23 amazing Veterans profoundly impacting our communities in ways that we could not have imagined. Each person has proven that the military Veteran community is deeply rooted in service, commitment, honor, integrity, and selflessness. I hope that their stories resonate with you and encourage you to share in their passions as we work to improve the Chicago Veteran community one Veteran at a time.



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



**“Champions don’t
become champions
when they win an
event, but in the
hours, weeks,
months and years,
they spend preparing
for it.”
-Michael Jordan.**



OUR MISSION

Empowering Veterans to take control of their transitions throughout life.

Chicago Veterans is dedicated to building a supportive community allowing veterans to rediscover their purpose after their service. We achieve this by introducing veterans to new experiences and activities through various events and social engagements, providing veterans with opportunities to connect, network, and discover their own support network (tribe).

As indicated by the Department of Veterans Affairs, fostering social support stands as a critical element in enhancing the mental well-being of veterans.

These social support events come in diverse forms, ranging from structured activities like art classes and peer support groups to outdoor events such as hiking, sports, and picnics. We host more than 50 events annually, which encompass notable gatherings like the Veterans Ball, Ruck March, and Liberty Calls.

In addition to our Social Support Program, Chicago Veterans offers resource navigation, women's empowerment events, and transitional assistance through our education and employment readiness program.





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Mayra Maribel Arroyo

Human Resources Professional

United States Army

Sergeant First Class Mayra Maribel Arroyo, originally from the south side of Chicago, embarked on her military journey by enlisting in the U.S. Army in 2008, specializing in Human Resources. Her initial training took place at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, with her first duty assignment in Grafenwoehr, Germany, where she served as an Administrative Specialist in the 702nd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Company. She then moved on to the 87th CSSB based at Fort Stewart, GA, and subsequently attended the Mission Command Training Program at Fort Leavenworth, KS.

She was selected for recruiting duty in Chicago, where she developed a strong passion for the art of recruiting and transitioned to the 79R career field. Her roles included serving as a Deputy Station Commander, followed by an assignment in Naples, Florida, within the Tampa Battalion, where she excelled as a Station Commander.

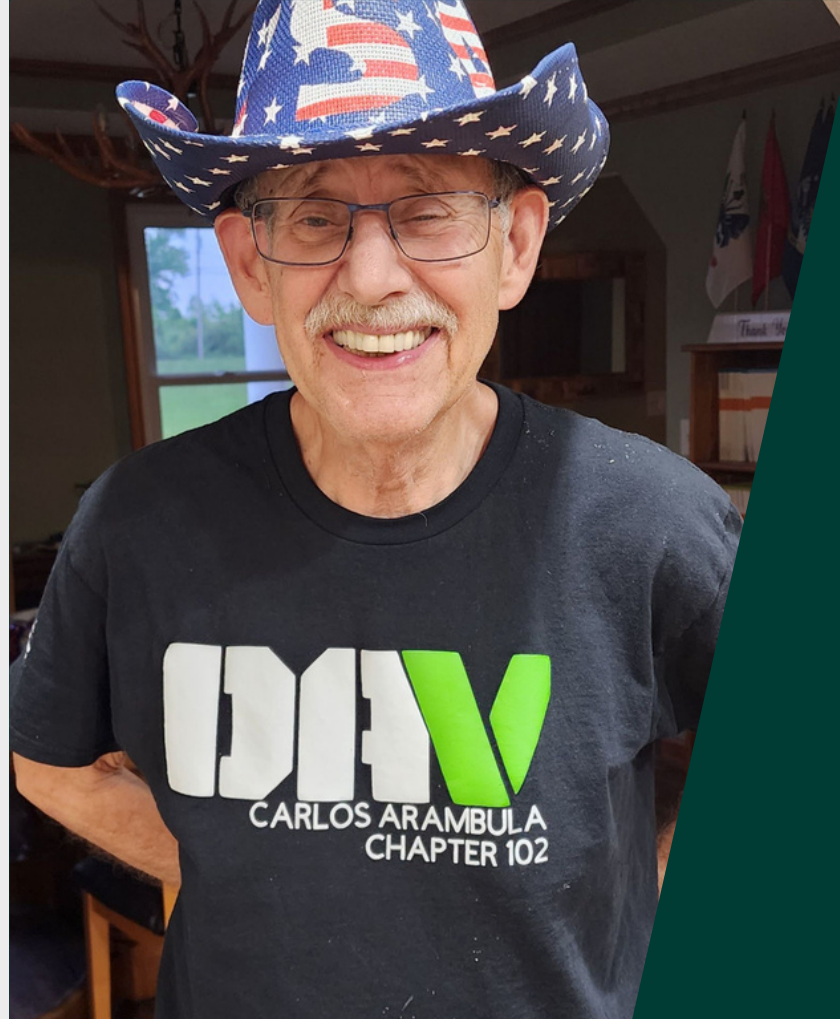
She returned to the Chicago Battalion and currently holds the position of Station Commander for the North Riverside Recruiting Station.

Throughout her military career, SFC Arroyo completed several military schools and training programs, including the Basic Leader Course, Advanced Leader Course, Station Commander Course, and Senior Leader Course. She participated in training related to SHARP, EO, and Battle Staff. Complementing her military achievements, she earned a bachelor's degree in human resource management from Upper Iowa University and is presently pursuing her master's in human resources in organizational development with the University of Louisville.

Beyond her military commitments, SFC Arroyo is married to Anthony (Tony) Arroyo, and together they are parents to two children, Anthony and Mariyah, as well as the proud owners of two fur-babies named Snoopy and Simba.

Words of Wisdom:

Lead me, follow me or get out of my way!



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Michael Duane Chiarodo

Vietnam Veteran

United States Marine Corps Veteran

Michael Duane Chiarodo, originally from Roseland, Illinois and of Italian heritage, enlisted in the Marine Corps in October 1966. He was quickly deployed to Vietnam in January 1967, where he achieved the rank of Sergeant and received two Purple Hearts for his valor and service during his 12-month tour in Vietnam. Chiarodo serves as the Officer of the Day and Volunteer Coordinator for Disabled American Veterans Chapter 102, located in Valparaiso, Indiana.

Over the past eight years, he has dedicated 80 hours each summer to fundraising activities, focused on providing support to other veterans. In his daily routine, Mr. Chiarodo actively engages with his community, expressing gratitude to fellow veterans for their service and extending appreciation to all those who contribute to the welfare of veterans and their families. His unwavering commitment to this noble cause is truly admirable.

Words of Wisdom:

You are not alone, you matter and I thank you for your service!



Lourdes Fernando

Business Owner

United States Army Veteran

Lourdes' journey began in a quaint California town, just an hour east of bustling San Francisco. Inspired by her two cousins who served in the Marine Corps, she felt a calling to follow in their footsteps, but her dream was to become a nurse. At 17, she joined the Army National Guard's medical field to pursue her passion for healthcare.

During her 11-year military career, Lourdes tackled three diverse specialties and participated in numerous special missions. She spent three years promoting the Army National Guard as a Marketing Specialist on a mobile recruiting team in 43 states. Afterward, she volunteered to assist in California's forest fires mission, working alongside wildland firefighters. As a recruiter, she guided civilians toward service opportunities. Following her service, Lourdes pursued two Master's degrees while living in Washington State. Her path led her to Chicago due to a PCS move, where she ventured into real estate, assisting veterans and service members with VA home loan benefits. She achieved her dream of becoming a landlord, purchased a four-unit property with a VA home loan, and became an instructor for VA housing education. She serves as the Midwest Regional Ambassador for Keller Williams Military and contributes to the Agent Leadership Counsel.

Transitioning from the military brought challenges, but Lourdes found acceptance at a Chicago Veterans event and became integral to local veteran organizations. She dedicates her time and support, coordinating events for women veterans, fostering a nurturing environment for lasting friendships.

Lourdes' journey reflects her dedication to service, resilience, and unwavering commitment to supporting fellow veterans.

Words of Wisdom:

If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving.

Charles Frangos

Co-Founder

United States Navy Veteran



**Words of
Wisdom:**

**The power
of positive
thinking is
no joke.
Dream big
and
manifest
your
dreams into
reality.**

Charles Frangos, a third-generation Greek American hailing from the western Chicago suburbs, decided to follow in his grandfather's World War II footsteps and joined the military after high school. Between 1997 and 2002, he served with distinction in the US Navy as a Naval Aircrewman, amassing over 1500 flight hours as an In-Flight Technician aboard the P-3 Orion aircraft. His dedication shone in Persian Gulf tactical sorties for Operations Southern Watch and Enduring Freedom, as well as combat missions in Afghanistan in support of the Global War on Terror, earning him the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal.

Charles holds a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). While at UIC, he not only excelled academically but also assumed leadership as the president of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) student chapter. He co-founded "Veterans in Engineering," an organization aiding veterans returning from military service. His humanitarian pursuits led him to Central America as part of UIC's Engineers Without Borders, contributing to the design and implementation of a drinking water distribution system in rural Guatemala, aimed at combating diseases that afflict children.

With 15 years of experience as a licensed Professional Engineer in infrastructure planning, he worked at two mid-sized engineering firms before co-founding Orion Engineers in 2015. Beyond his professional life, Charles is deeply committed to aiding the homeless and supporting vulnerable children. He also serves as the Post President of the Society of American Military Engineers (SAME), dedicated to fundraising for veterans' service organizations and charitable causes. Charles calls Chicago home, residing with his partner Dafne and their two middle school children, Will and Sofia.

Teresa Dawn Furr

Certified Peer Specialist

United States Navy Veteran



Words of Wisdom:

This right now, is just a part of your story, just a chapter, just a moment. Don't let it be your ending.

Teresa Dawn Furr is from a small North Carolina town. At 19, she ventured into the U.S. Navy. Specializing in submarine communications, her naval career unfolded at K.I. Sawyer AFB in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. It was there that she encountered Joseph Long, an Air Force veteran, and together they have shared 33 years of marriage, raised three children, and cherished three loyal dogs.

During Active Duty, Teresa experienced a traumatic brain injury that led to her medical release from service. With the unwavering support of the VBA, she underwent vocational rehabilitation, culminating in the attainment of a Bachelor's degree in Education. For 15 years, she taught in Chicago, but unaddressed mental health issues prompted her to leave her teaching career behind.

With the guidance of the VA and her psychiatrist, Teresa received the help she needed and was introduced to resources such as Compensated Work Therapy (CWT). This transformative experience eventually led her to a fulfilling role at Hines VA, where she initially worked at the Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC) as a PSA. Following her acquisition of a Peer Support certification, she transitioned to a role as a Peer Specialist.

As a Peer Specialist on the inpatient unit, she often assumes the role of Veteran's Advocate, ensuring their voices are heard and that they receive the highest quality care. She conducts group sessions and one-on-one meetings with veterans. Additionally, she plays a vital role in collecting veteran feedback as they exit the unit and collaborates with mental health leadership to implement necessary changes to enhance the quality of care for all veterans.



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Manuel Guzman

Chicago Police Officer

United States Army Veteran

Words of Wisdom:

The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do.

The hard part is doing it.

Manuel was born and raised in Bayamon, Puerto Rico moving to Chicago in 1988. After graduating from high school Manuel enlisted in the US Army.

The Army took him on various journeys, including deployments to Idaho to combat wildfires, assisting with flood relief efforts in Mississippi, supporting the Border Patrol, and even working as a Spanish translator in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to aid with Cuban migrant issues in the 1990s.

His military journey came to an honorable end in 1999.

In 2002, following his family's long tradition of law enforcement he joined the Chicago Police Department.

Throughout his career, he's been assigned to various roles and districts, including the 014th district in the Humboldt Park area, the 025th district, the Organized Crime Division, the O'Hare Operations Unit, and currently serving as a District Coordination Officer Supervisor in the 010th District.

During his time as a Chicago police officer, he's had the privilege of meeting fellow officers who, like himself, have also served our nation in the Armed Forces. It became apparent that they all faced similar challenges, particularly in terms of not being adequately informed about the benefits available to veterans.

Since 2012, he's dedicated his time and effort assisting veterans, providing information and resources they need to access their benefits. He volunteers at the VA Medical Center Jesse Brown and is an active member of the Disabled American Veterans organization. Manuel takes great pride in serving both his country and his community as a Chicago Police Officer and as a proud Chicago Veteran. His commitment to helping fellow veterans navigate the complexities of their benefits is a reflection of his proven dedication to the principles of service, duty, and community.

Gladys “Priscilla” Hall

Women’s Health Advocate

United States Airforce Veteran

Gladys Hall has a passion for service can be traced back to early childhood. She was reared primarily in the Bible Belt with a mother and extended family who were heavily invested in service to others. This instilled within her a growing desire to be a part of something greater than herself.

The desire to serve became a continuous theme in her life. Gladys has worked various roles in healthcare, served two terms in AmeriCorps/Campus-Link and Vista, served overseas in the Air Force in support of OIF and OEF, returning home to work with DHS and Vanderbilt University Hospital Trauma Services. Her service and care for her fellow humans continued with volunteering in hospice while serving a term as a SheForce Program Leader through AllenForce.

Gladys was also chosen to receive a General Assembly from the State of Illinois House of Representative for the first official Women’s Veterans Day on June 12th, 2022 for her work with AllenForce, SheForce Program Leader and Air Force veteran. Both her passion to serve and continued quest for learning has played major roles in her life in her studies of Human Services, Psychology, Sociology and current studies at Indiana University Northwest.

Gladys continues to serve others through church services, community service, hospice work, various non-profits, Women’s Mental Health Advisory Board and membership with International Association for Women. Her journey has led her to her current role as a Certified Peer Specialist in Women’s Mental Health with Veterans Affairs.

Words of Wisdom:

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in others.



Lalena Zoe Magnetta

Ms. Veteran America (2RU)

United States Navy Veteran

Lalena “Zoe” Magnetta is a Navy Veteran and passionate community servant residing in the Village of Grayslake. Zoe grew up in rural North California and in Las Vegas, Nevada; but her call to service began in the wake of 9/11 and included deployments onboard aircraft carriers USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and USS John C. Stennis, participating in Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF) as an Aviation Electronics Technician. After her assigned duties abroad, she culminated with a tour as a Recruit Division Commander at Naval Station Great Lakes. She served 11 years Active Duty before being honorably discharged. She used her Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to receive two Master's degrees; an MBA from the University of Redlands and an MS in Global Supply Chain Management from the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business.

A passionate advocate for her veteran sisters in need, Zoe ran in the Ms. Veteran America Competition and won the title of 2019 Ms. Veteran America Second Runner Up (2RU) and raised thousands of dollars assisting hundreds of women veterans with her “Combat Boots to Business Suits” clothing and accessory assistance program.

Taking it even a step further, Zoe has continued to serve in local government as an elected official (Trustee) on the Grayslake Village Board since 2020. She also serves in her local VFW Post as the Service Officer and serves as Board Chair for a non-profit in Waukegan.

In her personal life, Zoe is married to Mike Magnetta, a retired US Navy Command Master Chief, and has two stepchildren and three beautiful grandchildren. In her free time, she loves to run marathons and enjoys helping to train others to achieve the same goal.

Words of Wisdom:

Marcus Aurelius would say that the Stoic finds a way to turn every negative into a positive. “The obstacle is the way.” We don’t get to control when things get hard, but we always can control how we respond.



Saul Marchan

Entrepreneur

United States Marine Corps Veteran

Saul Marchan's strong roots are firmly embedded in the vibrant neighborhoods of Chicago's north side. He proudly holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the U of I at Urbana-Champaign, where he had the opportunity to join the United States Marine Corps, serving in Supply Administration during his college years.

Following his college journey, Saul gained valuable experience working in industry-leading Fortune 500 firms for 13 years. His entrepreneurial spirit led him to venture into business ownership, and in 2013, he founded BLU Commercial Cleaning. Under his leadership, BLU has become a trusted provider of professional cleaning services for a diverse range of establishments and facilities.

Saul is a devoted family man, married with two children, relishing the joys and challenges of parenthood with his daughter and son.

Saul's entrepreneurial endeavors extend beyond BLU, as the founder and partner at Bluberry, a SAAS operations software platform designed for service-based businesses empowering peers to make growth-focused decisions driven by data.

Saul is a graduate of prestigious programs, including the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Program, the LBAN Scaling program at Stanford University, and the Illinois Tollway Technical Assistance Program. He actively engages the community by providing mentorship to young minds at Palmer Elementary School and the Belmont & Cragin Early Childhood Development Center.

In his discussions on entrepreneurship and leadership, Saul's vision and mission are to serve as a mentor and resource, inspiring and supporting underserved communities in their journey to become future business leaders. Each day, striving to make a positive impact in the roles of a businessman, community leader, father, and lifelong learner.

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Words of Wisdom:

If you think the price of winning is too high, wait till you get the bill of regret.



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Jaime 'Jimmy' Ochoa

UPS Franchise Owner

United States Navy Veteran

Words of Wisdom:

Treat people the way you wish to be treated.

Jaime "Jimmy" Ochoa is a proud Chicagoland native and a 20-year Navy Veteran. Born in Melrose Park, Illinois, his parents hailed from Durango and Michoacan, Mexico. His formative years were spent in Bellwood, where he completed his education at Fenton High School in Bensenville, Illinois. Remarkably, he graduated from high school ahead of schedule, entering Navy Bootcamp at the Navy's Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, Illinois, by April 1998.

Throughout his two decades of Naval service, Jimmy's assignments included stints aboard the USS Germantown, USS Harper's Ferry, USS Ronald Reagan,

USNS Carl Brashear, USS Boxer, and USS Makin Island.

His land-based postings encompass Navy Recruiting District Chicago and Naval Station Great Lakes. With nine deployments and over 13 years of at-sea experience, his contributions have been invaluable.

Over the years, Jimmy held various leadership roles, such as Leading Chief, Assistance Officer-in-Charge, Food Service Officer, Materials Officer, and Aviation Supply Officer. In the latter role, he managed an Aviation Parts Inventory program valued at over \$300 million, showcasing his remarkable responsibility and accountability.

Presently, Jimmy owns and manages a UPS Store Franchise in Bensenville, Illinois. He is actively engaged with Fenton High School, offering motivational speeches and conducting mock job interviews to prepare the next generation of young leaders for the challenges of the real world. Furthermore, he serves as a Trustee with his local VFW Post and holds the position of Director in two distinct Chamber of Commerce. Above all, he is a dedicated and caring father to his two wonderful children, Alex and Ana.

Kerry Perkins

Radio Host

United States Marine Corps Veteran

Kerry Perkins, a Marine Corps veteran and Berkshire Hathaway Home Services Realtor, hails from Elk Grove Village as the 4th of 5 children. Born prematurely at just 1lb. 13oz, Kerry overcame the odds as a "Miracle Baby." Despite frequent relocations, Elk Grove Village remained her anchor. At Elk Grove High School, Kerry shone in the prestigious swing choir, concert choir, and the theater and arts program. Her strong work ethic stems from her father, a Vietnam-era Air Force veteran, who played the roles of her best friend, mentor, and advisor, offering unwavering support.

Kerry's Marine Corps stint saw her stationed in Okinawa, Japan, at Camp Courtney for over a year, followed by service at Cherry Point Air Station in Havelock, North Carolina. These years were transformative, molding her character and revealing life's lessons.

Post-military life, Kerry pursued a BA in Communications at Northern Illinois University. After four years in media production, she transitioned into real estate, achieving the Military Relocation Professional (MRP) certification. Kerry is deeply committed to assisting diverse communities. She actively engages with organizations such as AREAA (Asian Real Estate Association of America), G7 Networking as a chapter President, and serves as an Advisory Board Member of A Safe Haven. These affiliations align with her life's purpose: positively impacting lives.

Furthermore, she co-hosts the radio show "Good To Know with Liz Goodchild" on AM 1160. Her unwavering work ethic, nurtured throughout her upbringing and magnified during her Marine Corps service, fuels her dedication to her career and community service. Kerry takes immense pride in having served her country and continues to serve her communities with passion and dedication.

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Words of Wisdom:

The power of positive thinking is no joke. Dream big and manifest your dreams into reality.



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William Pishotta

Corporate Talent Advocate

United States Army Veteran

Words of Wisdom:

Your next mission is to have a successful transition.

William Pishotta is the National Military Recruiting Program Manager for Combined, a Chubb Company headquartered in Chicago. William joined Combined Insurance in 2017 and is responsible for managing and recruiting for Combined's best-in-class Military Program. William is responsible for attracting, hiring, retaining, and supporting, military veterans, military spouses, and family member talent.

He is a Chair member for his organization's Military Business Roundtable Group called SALUTE. William is passionate about helping veterans and military spouses transition into the civilian workforce and find meaningful and rewarding careers.

His leadership has resulted in Combined Insurance being recognized for awards to include the #1 Military Friendly Employer in the \$1B - \$5B revenue category 5 years in a row by VIQTORY. He has been individually recognized as a 2022 Veteran Leader of the Year and 2021 Veteran Champion of the Year in Corporate America by G.I. Jobs®, a prestigious honor presented to those who champion the recruitment, hiring, retention, and career advancement of U.S. military veterans in corporate America. William is a tireless advocate and volunteer for the military community in the state of Illinois and nationwide.

In the past, William worked for U.S. Senator Mark Kirk (IL). He served in multiple roles including Veterans Caseworker, Special Assistant, and Director of Veterans Outreach. During his five years of Active Duty in the U.S. Army, he completed two overseas deployments in support of OEF and OIF as a Light Wheeled Mechanic with the 754th Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit. William has a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal & Social Justice from Lewis University in Illinois. He is currently pursuing his Master's degree from the University of Illinois and resides in Cary, Illinois with his wife Danielle and their six children.



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Joshua Ryan Polega

**National Cemetery
General Foreman**

United States Army Veteran

Joshua Ryan Polega, raised in a military family, had the unique experience of growing up in Germany and in the United States. His own military journey took him to North Carolina and Washington, as well as serving multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. With an engineering background, Joshua assumed leadership roles and led multiple teams during his 12-year military career.

After leaving the military, Joshua transitioned into civilian life by becoming a dedicated volunteer firefighter/paramedic in Manteno, IL. Subsequently, he found his calling at The VA National Cemetery Administration and has been working at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery ever since.

As the general foreman, he takes great pride in ensuring that veterans and their family members receive their final resting place with the utmost respect and care.

Joshua's commitment to supporting, educating, and employing veterans runs deep. He has personally lost many friends during the war and has experienced loss at home with teammates taking their lives after not being able to adjust to civilian life.

With both his brother and brother-in-law currently serving in the armed forces, their home proudly displays the American flag.

Words of Wisdom:

**All men's
souls are
created equal,
only the souls
of the
righteous are
divine.**

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Eden Puentes

Purple Heart Recipient

United States Army Veteran

Words of Wisdom:

Be the reason our veteran community flourishes! If all we can do is some, less will have to do more.

Eden Puentes was born and raised in the south suburbs of Chicago. Enlisting in the U.S Army after the tragic events of 9/11, he went on to deploy for OEF and OIF. Eden was wounded in action on his last day in country when his unit was hit with an IED, slamming Puentes's head against the frame of the humvee. He sustained a TBI and shrapnel to his wrist, knuckles, and lower back; he received a Purple Heart for his wounds.

Like most veterans returning home from war, Eden struggled to find community. It wasn't until he asked for help and attended his first veteran event, The Chicago Veterans Ruck March, that doors started to open for him.

He would soon attend and graduate from DePaul University with both a Bachelor's and Master's in Business Administration.

His proudest achievement was during the pandemic, he worked with the Travis Manion Foundation giving away over 55,000 lbs. of food to over 1,800 families. He was honored as an Honor Roll recipient of the George H.W. Bush Points of Light Award for his incredible work.

In 2019, Eden met his mentor, PGA Professional Juan Espejo. They started a program dedicated to growing the game of golf for all veterans.

Through their program, veterans learn the game of golf while developing an understanding of positive psychology and character development. It was through the lessons that Eden was crowned National Champion of the Wounded Division by the Veterans Golfers Association (VGA).

Eden Puentes is currently the Midwest Senior Coordinator for the Travis Manion Foundation, which works to empower veterans and families of fallen heroes through mentorship and other programs.



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Mike Rogers

Veteran Outreach Specialist

United States Army Veteran

Michael Rogers has been serving as the Veteran Outreach Specialist at the Forest Park Vet Center since August 2015. Mr. Rogers retired from the US Army/MNARNG as an Infantry Platoon Sgt. in 2009 with over 20 years of military service.

His military experience had him complete multiple deployments in Eastern Europe, Kosovo and Iraq. After leaving the military, he has worked with Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and as a civilian contractor at Naval Station Great Lakes.

Mike is a combat veteran that earned many decorations including the CIB, multiple commendations, and achievement medals during his military career.

Mr. Rogers has a Bachelor of Science in Education. His most important title/role is Dad to a profoundly unique and amazing teenager. He is a Minnesota native and resides in the northern suburbs of Chicago since 2007. There is enjoyment to be had as a Minnesota Vikings fan living and thriving “behind enemy lines”.

As a Veteran Outreach Specialist/Veteran he has many contacts with Veteran Service Organizations. In 2019, Mr. Rogers received the Veteran of the Year Award from Chicago Veterans.

One of the most significant and impactful parts of his current position is being on many planning committees, advisory boards and councils and his major involvement with the Chicago Standdowns.

Words of Wisdom:

If you find yourself being the smartest person in the room on a consistent basis, you need to find new rooms.



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William Shehan

Nonprofit Founder

United States Army Veteran

Words of Wisdom:

Do what you can, when you can, with what's at hand with a giving heart.

William Shehan, raised by his missionary grandmother and having had the privilege of traveling to various parts of the world, learned to respect and appreciate diverse cultures. This early exposure instilled in him a lifelong commitment to service. As his grandmother grew older and could no longer provide the care and guidance he needed as a seventh-grader, William found himself under the care of Thornwell Home for Children.

During his time at Thornwell Home, he had the fortune of being mentored by an exceptional individual named Willie Rice. Under Willie's guidance, William developed a strong work ethic, a deep dedication to a mission, and unwavering loyalty to others.

At 18, William decided that the best way to continue serving others was by enlisting in the U.S. Army. He embarked on two tours on the DMZ in South Korea and was subsequently assigned to the 9th Infantry Division, where he was injured in the line of duty during the Gulf War.

In 1999, William entered the Jesse Brown VA hospital, taking the initial steps to address his battle with PTSD. Over the last 25 years, he has explored various modalities offered by the VA and even created a few of his own. In 2002, he initiated a program called Chess for Veterans, realizing that gaining control over the 64 squares on a chessboard could parallel veterans regaining control over their lives.

William founded No Salt Sailing with the goal of assisting veterans in learning how to sail and acquire seamanship skills. Beyond this, the program aims to provide veterans with a sense of mission, opportunities to develop new skill sets, and a welcoming community to return to. In the past year, William earned his U.S. Coast Guard Captain's license and US Sailing Instructor Credentials. He has also cultivated relationships with different harbors, marinas, and organizations within Chicago's maritime and veterans' communities, furthering his mission to support his fellow veterans.

Elizabeth Soto

Cook County Superintendent

United States Army Veteran



Words of Wisdom:

Our passions are ignited when we set out to advance a cause greater than ourselves.

Elizabeth Soto is born and raised between Chicago and Cicero and has a heritage that is a rich blend of Mexican, French, and American roots, mirroring the diverse cultural tapestry of her family. After dedicating nine years of her life to the U.S. Army National Guard, Elizabeth embarked on a new journey of service within the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County.

Over the past nine years, she has had the privilege of contributing in various roles and capacities within the organization, fostering a profound appreciation for the veterans community she serves.

Beyond her professional commitments, she is a devoted spouse and a mother of three, with her family serving as the core of her inspiration and drive to make a positive impact in the lives of veterans and their families.

Today, Elizabeth holds the esteemed position of Superintendent, marking a historic milestone as the first Latina and the first female to assume this role in the organization's illustrious 90-plus-year history.

Her commitment to serving veterans remains unwavering, and she eagerly anticipates the years ahead where she can continue to make a positive impact within the veteran community. Being nominated as one of the 23 veterans recognized in 2023 is a remarkable privilege for Elizabeth. She views serving veterans not just as a duty but as a lifelong passion and honor that she holds dear.



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Yvette Jones Swanson

Entrepreneur

United States Army Veteran

Words of Wisdom:

Life may test you, bend you, and bring you to your knees, but remember that you possess an indomitable spirit forged by the fire of service.

Yvette Jones Swanson is an inspiring individual who overcame numerous challenges to become a successful entrepreneur and advocate for veterans. Born and raised in Chicago, she grew up in the ABLA community in public housing. Despite facing adversity, she was determined to create a better life for herself. Yvette attended Holy Family Grammar School and Cathedral High School before pursuing higher education at Northern Illinois University, Loop Junior College, Columbia College, and Northeastern Illinois University. She earned a bachelor's and a master's degree, proving her commitment to personal growth and education.

Her military experience proved to be another significant aspect of her life. She served in the US Army, gaining valuable skills and a strong sense of discipline.

Yvette is the CEO and founder of 100 Pretty Purses for Female Veterans, an organization that provides support and resources to female veterans. Additionally, she is the CEO of VetMentors, LLC, offering mentoring and guidance to veterans seeking to start their own businesses. She also designs housing options for individual veterans and Veteran Villages. Yvette's journey has not been without hardship.

She faced homelessness on multiple occasions due to domestic violence. Despite these challenging circumstances, she never lost her determination to build a better future for herself. Yvette experienced nights sleeping in her car, on public transportation, and sought refuge in the YWCA Shelter for women affected by domestic violence.

Today, Yvette is happily married to Army Retired Master Sergeant Steven Swanson, who has been a source of support and strength throughout her endeavors. Together, they continue to create positive change in the lives of veterans through their work and advocacy.

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Cassandra Taylor

Nonprofit Founder

United States Army Veteran



Words of Wisdom:

We as veterans never stop serving! We may hang up our boots but never our commitment to our community. By helping our sisters/brothers-in-arms, we also help our community. Together we can make a difference.

Cassandra Taylor, a 28-year Army Veteran, was born and raised in Maywood, Illinois. She initially attended Proviso East High School for her first two years, but she relocated to Fort Madison, IA, where she ultimately graduated from Fort Madison High School. Following high school, Cassandra pursued her education at Kirkwood Community College and later transferring to the University of Iowa in Iowa City, IA. Her academic journey led her to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in Technical Management from DeVry University in Addison, IL. A year later, she furthered her education, earning a Master's Degree in Human Resource Management from Keller Graduate School of Management in Schaumburg, IL. Additionally, she holds an MBA with a concentration in Healthcare Management.

Among her accolades, Cassandra is recognized as the Founder and CEO of Top Flight Defense, Inc, a non-profit organization focused on supporting women veterans. Currently, she is employed as an Associate Analyst at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, IL. Her talents have been showcased at various sporting and military events, including the Chicago Sky WMBA, Professional Bull Riders, Chicago Wolves, Chicago Bandits, MISSION BBQ, and Monster Truck Jam. She is an active member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, specifically the Schaumburg Hoffman Estates Alumnae Chapter, as well as the National Association of Black Military Women.



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Michael Tellerino

Nonprofit Founder

United States Army Veteran

**Words of
Wisdom:**

**You will
never walk
alone.**

Michael Tellerino, a United States Army veteran honorably discharged in 1971, resides in Plainfield, Illinois. He is the proud father of three children, a grandfather of three, and a great-grandfather of one.

As the CEO and Founder of K9s For Veterans, NFP. Michael's primary mission is to provide service dogs to veterans in need. In pursuit of this objective, his organization rescues dogs from high-risk kill shelters and delivers comprehensive training to prepare them for service.

Michael proudly serves as the CEO and founder of The Forgotten Warrior Memorial, situated within Channahon State Park, Channahon, Illinois. The memorial stands as a tribute to brave veterans and their families, particularly those who have lost a loved one to suicide resulting from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Beyond his roles with these organizations, Michael extensively travels throughout the state of Illinois, collaborating with local VFWs and American Legions to raise awareness about PTSD and its profound impact on veterans' lives. By actively engaging with these communities, he endeavors to create a supportive dialogue that benefits those affected by PTSD and their families.

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Armando Vega

Veterans In Recovery Mentor

United States Army Veteran



Words of Wisdom:

If you found recovery in your life, don't be selfish. Share your story and pass the message to others. We don't always know who is struggling, and your words just might help them find hope and faith again in their life.

Armando Vega Jr was born and raised in the south side of Chicago in the McKinley and Brighton Park neighborhood. Served 8 years Army from 2004-2012 with 25th Infantry Division and USASOC 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne). Deployed twice in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom as Vehicle search on gate guard and a gunner on QRF roving patrol team rest of deployment in Tikrit, Iraq (FOB Speicher).

After a challenging journey marked by struggles with PTSD and alcohol abuse, Vega finally found hope, faith and purpose. He learned to share his experiences and recovery skills with those seeking support. Vega strongly believes in the value of Peer Support, having received significant help not only from his fellowship support group but also from fellow Vietnam veterans within that group, who played a crucial role in his recovery. This experience taught him the importance of selflessness in his recovery journey and inspired him to pass on the support to the next person in need.

Vega has initiated a Veterans Recovery Support Group in collaboration with Chicago Veterans and orchestrates regular gatherings and events aimed at assisting individuals grappling with comparable challenges. Additionally, Vega serves as a Peer Support Specialist in the Mental Health Clinic at the VA.

Vega is currently pursuing his Master's degree in Clinical Psychology at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology (TCSP) in order to best serve his fellow service members that might be struggling as he did for years.

Vega's mission is to motivate, support, and aid veterans in locating the essential tools within their combat gear, enabling them to confront and conquer the internal battles they carry back home from the war. Recovery is possible, "ONE TEAM ONE FIGHT."

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Rogelio Villa

Community Trailblazer

United States Army Veteran



**Words of
Wisdom:**

**In giving,
we receive,
and in
serving, we
find true
purpose.**

Rogelio Villa, a proud South-West Chicago native from the Little Village community with a strong commitment to public service and extensive volunteer experience.

Presently, Rogelio serves as a Veteran Caseworker and Outreach Coordinator for Senator Duckworth's Office. Previously, Rogelio dedicated 15 years of his career to the City Colleges of Chicago, where he held the role of Veteran Affairs Certifying Official.

Rogelio's devotion to public service extends to his role as Chicago's 2nd Platoon Leader with The Mission Continues. Collaborating with nonprofit partners and community leaders, tackling critical issues such as Youth Violence, Veteran Homelessness, and Gun Violence Prevention.

Since May 2018, Rogelio has been serving as a volunteer Platoon Leader, having led 60 service projects within under-resourced communities, primarily in Little Village. To date, his work has mobilized over 900 volunteers, contributing over 4,300 hours of collective service. Rogelio's contributions have reshaped and redefined the community identity of youth and residents in Little Village. His commitment to mentorship is evident in his role as a veteran mentor for at-risk youth through the YMCA's "Urban Warriors Program" in 2017. Here, he guided young individuals through themes like coping, trauma, self-identity, and community, fostering trust and mentorship bonds.

Rogelio also dedicated his time to Congressman Gutierrez's office in 2015 as a volunteer for "Family Defender," educating the community about the application process to qualify for expanded DACA or DAPA.

Furthermore, Rogelio's military journey began in 2005 when he joined the Illinois Army National Guard's 1st Battalion 178th Infantry, Third Brigade Combat Team, First Infantry Division. Serving as a Light Infantryman, he was activated for Operation Enduring Freedom and deployed to Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009. During his deployment, he played the crucial role of a Crew Served Weapon Operator (Gunner), conducting over 300 missions.



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Gilbert Villegas

Chicago Alderman

United States Marine Corps Veteran

Gilbert Villegas is currently in his third term as Alderman representing Chicago's 36th Ward and oversees a diverse community on the city's Northwest Side. In his role, he not only serves the constituents of the 36th Ward but also holds prominent positions within the City government. During his initial term, Villegas took the initiative to create the first municipal Veteran Caucus in the United States. Villegas also helped reestablish the Office of Veterans Affairs for the City of Chicago and continues to support his military community within the City Council. His deep-rooted ties to Chicago are evident in his educational background, having attended Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and pursued a degree in Political Science at Northeastern Illinois University.

His influence extends beyond the political realm, as he is a respected figure within Chicago's Latino community. Having served as the Chairman of the Chicago Latino Caucus Foundation and is a founding member of the Illinois Latino Leadership Council. This council comprises civic, business, and elected leaders who work collaboratively to enhance Latino influence in both public and private sectors.

Villegas is a proud United States Marine Veteran who served in Desert Shield and Desert Storm serving in the 2nd Light Antiaircraft Missile Battalion. His honorable military service and commitment to education have shaped his distinguished career and community involvement. Villegas is a dedicated father of two sons and lives with his fiancée and a Pawdre to a golden doodle.

Words of Wisdom:

I remember my Drill Instructor telling us recruits that to be a U.S. Marine is an honor of a lifetime and it won't be easy. If it was easy, everyone would be doing it.



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