

# ED Update: Thank you to our veterans

## Thank you to our veterans

Each year in November, we mark two important holidays - Thanksgiving and Veterans' Day. This month is a time for reflection, for appreciation of the most basic freedoms we enjoy, without even thinking about it, each day.

I can think of no better way to thank our veterans than to acknowledge their sacrifice by telling their story.

At Community Legal Aid, veterans make up a large segment of our client population. Just last year, we closed 660 cases for veterans. Far too often, we meet men and women who have served our country and who now live in poverty, who can't access much needed medical care or public assistance programs, who are homeless. And while each of our client's cases are critically important, there is a symbolic sense of pride when we are able to help someone who has worn a military uniform access the justice system they have fought to protect.

One of these individuals agreed to sit down with us this year and share her story. Susan Fruscella came to Legal Aid seeking help accessing disability benefits through the VA. But as we find with all of our clients, this was just one of a myriad of issues Susan was struggling with.

Susan entered the military right out of high school, drawn by the promise of a bright future, free college education, and a desire to make her family proud. In the '70s, she was the first and only woman in the 101st Airborne Division.

Soon after arriving in her post, Susan began experiencing gender discrimination and harassment. As the only woman in her unit, she was continuously criticized and made to feel like an outcast. That is, until one day, when she was invited to join her fellow soldiers for a round of food and drinks at a local bar.

"I thought, they were finally going to accept me," she shared with us. "And I was so happy - I'll never forget that moment."

But the evening didn't turn out the way Susan had hoped. She was raped by two of her fellow soldiers - an event that sparked a downward spiral for her.

Susan left the military shortly after that event happened. She didn't share with anyone what had happened, and she withdrew from family and friends. As the years passed, she found it increasingly difficult to manage a normal life and bounced from job to job, home to home, relationship to relationship - until she finally landed in a homeless shelter.

The emotional turmoil was overwhelming, and Susan tried to take her own life nine times. Unable to overcome the trauma of her past, she became incapable of holding a job. She was repeatedly denied disability benefits from the VA, as there were no records of her rape, and therefore no basis for her mental health claims.

Finally, a doctor recommended she reach out to Legal Aid. Our veterans' advocates worked to get Susan's disability benefits approved. She sought professional help for her PTSD. And slowly, things got better.

Today, Susan is working and supporting herself. She lives modestly but comfortably in her own home. She went on to have a family, and now has grandchildren she loves visiting with.

And even after everything she has endured, Susan still finds a way to give back and support her community.

“I used to rely on food banks,” she explained. “Now, I’m giving money to food banks.”

Thank you, Susan. Thank you, all our veterans. Your sacrifice does not go unnoticed, nor unappreciated. It’s an honor that here at Legal Aid, we now have the opportunity to serve you.

Steven McGarrity, Esq.

Executive Director, Community Legal Aid

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