

Spring 2026

QUESTIONS THAT CONNECT:

Why you should ask about
Military Service



HAVE YOU OR ANYONE YOU KNOW EVER SERVED IN THE MILITARY?



Military service isn't always obvious. The person you're speaking with could be eligible for important services and benefits they don't know exist. Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF) represent a distinct group of individuals with unique needs.

ASK ME NC focuses on asking the question at places where SMVF are receiving services in the community including healthcare, human services, libraries, the justice system and more.

Addressing needs among Service Members, Veterans and their Families related to the social determinants of health can play a role in preventing suicide.



1 ASK

Ask "Have you or anyone you know served in the military?" Identifying and connecting them to the benefits and resources they have earned could improve health and wellbeing.

2 CONNECT

This simple question allows professionals to connect people with resources they've earned— and follow up with, "How are you feeling?" ensures we're also supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

3 PROTECT

Being connected to healthcare and resources is a protective factor against suicide. By normalizing both questions, we create safer, more supportive environments where the SMVF community can be heard, understood, and guided toward the right care.

4 CALL TO ACTION

Educated and Empowered Veterans thrive in our communities. Let's ensure that every North Carolinian who has served, and their families are recognized and supported. By simply asking, we open doors to stories, resources, and healing.



CALL 1-855-962-8387

A MESSAGE FROM MENTAL HEALTH DIRECTOR KELLY CROSBIE



To our North Carolina Veterans, Families, and Community Partners,

As we move forward together this year, I want to take a moment to lift up and renew our shared commitment to the “Ask Me NC” campaign.

Many of you have already embraced its message, weaving it into daily conversations, community gatherings, and moments of quiet connection. And I’m grateful — because those small moments truly matter.

In my role as Director of the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services, I’m fortunate to hear stories every day from veterans and families whose courage goes far beyond their time in uniform. I see the strength it takes to ask for help, the resilience found in community, and the hope that grows when someone feels heard. That is exactly what “Ask Me NC” is all about: checking in, showing up, and reminding one another that no one has to carry their struggles alone.

This mission is deeply personal

for me. My father and both of my grandfathers served, and the lessons they carried home — about pride, sacrifice, and sometimes quiet hardship — shaped who I am. Their experiences remind me every day that behind every uniform is a whole person, with a whole story, and a whole life that deserves support.

So as we continue this work, I simply want to encourage all of us to keep leaning in. Keep asking the gentle questions. Keep offering a listening ear. Keep being present for the veterans in your lives and communities. A small gesture can make an enormous difference.

Thank you — for your service, your honesty, and the trust you place in us. We’re here, we’re committed, and we’re walking alongside you.

A MESSAGE FROM GOVERNOR JOSH STEIN



When someone makes the courageous choice to serve in the military, their life changes. Their family’s lives change, too. When they return home, they deserve more than words -- they deserve real support.

Through “Ask Me NC” and NC STRIVE, North Carolina is expanding paths to higher education and strengthening mental health support for veterans and their families. These are crucial lifelines

for many struggling to navigate the challenges of life after their military service.

No one should have to do it alone. Connecting veterans to the proper resources, support, and communities, opens new doors of opportunities for those who have given us so much. To those who have served, thank you for your selflessness to make our country a safer place. We’re behind you, and we will support you!

ANSWERING THE CALL TO SUPPORT

“Ask Me NC” opens the door for conversations with service members, veterans and their families.

Veterans in North Carolina were paid \$11.5 billion in compensation, pension and medical benefits in 2023. Despite those earnings, more than 47,300 veterans, roughly eight percent of the state’s veteran population, were living below the poverty line and over 770 of the state’s veterans experienced homelessness during that calendar year. Socioeconomic disparities remain challenging for many in the military-affiliated community and mental health concerns run high, with death by suicide 2.7 times greater among veterans than in the nonveteran population.

What makes these statistics even more tragic is that, despite a vast array of resources that exists to help veterans, the biggest barrier to accessing those resources is simply not knowing what to ask or where to turn.

No one recognizes this discrepancy better than veterans who have transitioned from military service into public service roles where they are working to ensure that every veteran receives the support they deserve.

That was the driving force behind the recently launched “Ask Me NC” campaign, a statewide initiative intended to improve the lives of veterans, service members and their families. It starts by encouraging everyone to ask a fundamental question: “Have you or a family member ever served in the military?” The intention being to open the door for conversation around military service and ultimately connect anyone within the military-affiliated community with the “Ask Me NC” website, where all the resources available to the veteran and military-affiliated community can be accessed via simple, intuitive steps.

The committee leading “Ask Me NC” is co-chaired by Paul Berry, who retired as a Command Sergeant Major after serving 30 years in the United States Marine Corps, and Karen Soutullo, the Assistant Director of the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Centerstone in Fayetteville. Berry’s veteran perspective is complemented by Soutullo’s clinical expertise as a licensed clinical mental health counselor. Berry also serves as Senior Director of Strategic Partnerships for Veterans Bridge Home, where the mission of connecting



Deployed to Iraq in 2005, Crystal Miller was away from her young family for a full year. She had panic attacks when she returned to work in the U.S. but rebuilding relationships with her four children was the hardest part.

with veterans dovetails with the objectives of “Ask Me NC.”

“It was a brand new, barely [defined] concept, when I briefed Secretary [Jocelyn] Mallette at the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs on ‘Ask Me NC,’ but she immediately said: ‘Let’s make it happen. Governor Stein is not going to say no to veterans,’” Berry said. “And she was right, Governor Stein not only agreed with this online platform for connecting veterans to support resources he also signed a proclamation endorsing the ‘Ask Me NC’ campaign.”

Berry introduced the governor’s proclamation during a virtual meeting of the North Carolina Governor’s Working Group on November 7th. The following day at the UNC-Chapel Hill Homecoming and Military Appreciation football game, “Ask Me NC” made its public debut, with the tagline prominently featured on the jumbotron and information cards distributed that feature a QR code enabling people to easily access the site.

“We had a tent and swag at the game, including

“ASK ME NC”

[AskMeNC.org](https://www.AskMeNC.org)

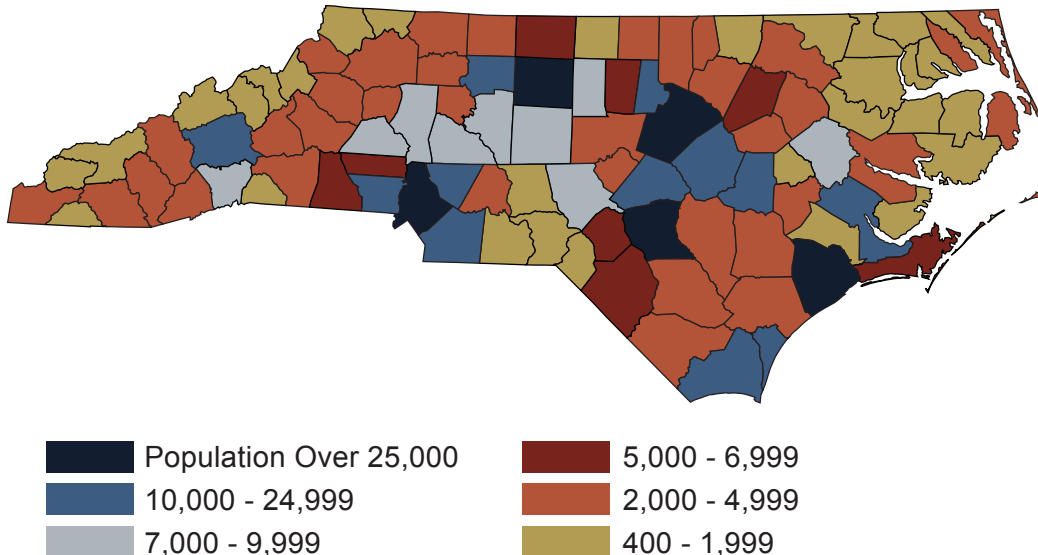
- Website went live: July 2025
- Official Launch: November 2025
- Website Visits: 10,000+ (July 2025 - Feb 2026)

the ‘Ask Me NC’ rack cards, and we’ve been going strong ever since,” said Berry. “People at the football game were saying they had no idea all these resources existed for veterans, and that’s what we keep hearing.”

It’s a grassroots effort that has steadily gained momentum. An initial printing of 5,000 rack cards was funded by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, at a cost of around \$1,500, and all the committee members leading the campaign, roughly a dozen people, are working as volunteers. But it’s a passion project for most of them, including Crystal Miller, Director of

NC Veteran Population by County

Wake County has the highest veteran population at 50,228, followed by Mecklenburg at 45,741 and Cumberland at 39,514.



Source: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners / February 2026

SMVF Programs at the Governor's Institute. Miller's personal trajectory — from single mom in the military to a traumatic re-entry into civilian life and across the years as she struggled without support — culminated in her conviction that "Ask Me NC" is the long-overdue answer for veterans living with crisis and conflict.

Why "Ask Me NC" Matters

"Here's the thing about 'Ask Me NC,' I did not recognize myself as a veteran until my youngest son asked me if I would speak at his school when he was in the seventh grade — and that was four years after I came back from Iraq," Miller said. "He introduced me to his class by saying: 'When y'all think about veterans y'all think about old men that fought in wars a long time ago in faraway places. But when I think about a veteran, I think of my mama.' And I lost it right then and there."

Allowing herself to emotionally break was a long time coming for Miller, who had joined the North Carolina National Guard in 1996 as a single mom, looking to support her son and get tuition assistance. By 2005 when she deployed for Iraq, she had remarried and her family had grown to four children. It was supposed to be a six-month deployment, then it extended to nine

months, and ultimately, she was deployed for a full year.

"People ask what the hardest thing was and it was not what they might expect," Miller said. It was "learning to love again" and having to work to re-establish her family relationships. Although the pain of missing her children was intense, "it wasn't as easy as just coming home, because I'd had to detach myself [emotionally] to survive, otherwise I couldn't function with that much pain."

Anxiety and trauma from having had both parents deploy while they were growing up left her children and stepchildren with struggles that have continued into adulthood, and from her family's experiences she knows secondary PTSD is real.

"Sometimes I question whether or not we did rebuild those relationships, and there are still some wounds that have never healed," she said.

There was no treatment, no help, when she transitioned out of the military. "It's been rough, and I didn't even know that I was having problems." Except she couldn't work for several months and when she did return to work at the school where she'd been employed before deploying to Iraq, she suffered panic attacks at

every staff meeting.

The principal convinced her to talk with someone, so Miller went to see a psychiatrist, but no one — not even a doctor or therapist — ever asked about her military service or made any connection between the problems she was having and the traumas she'd experienced during service. "That's why I'm so invested in this work with SMVF programs and especially with 'Ask Me NC.' When I tell you that, 'Ask Me NC' has so much meaning to me, it does. It's just unreal the people who still don't know they can get help, who have been put down, let down, and are detached. People that have not gotten the help they should have when they got home."

Mindful Outcomes

The campaign is intended to encourage someone who is not military-affiliated to ask a patient, a customer, a neighbor or even a stranger if they've ever served and then point them to the online portal for resource guidance. But it also seeks to engage veterans to ask about the benefits and support they are entitled to receive. Likewise, family members, caregivers and providers are encouraged to visit the "Ask Me NC" website to identify resources.

Prior to joining the Governor's Institute last summer, Miller was Veteran Services Supervisor in Mecklenburg County, where she was acutely aware that more than half of veterans fail to access their benefits. "When I left the Veterans Service office, we were at about a 55 to 60 percent benefits gap, which means at least 55 percent of the veterans in North Carolina are not receiving any benefit," she said. "I had an Air Force veteran come in who served for four years and couldn't hear a thing. But he thought because he had never deployed overseas, he wasn't a veteran. I'm like: You are absolutely a veteran and you're deaf. Go enroll in VA health care and get yourself some hearing aids. They're free and they're really going to help you."

The genesis of "Ask Me NC" dates to early 2020, when Miller and Berry convened in D.C. with a team to explore doing an "Ask the Question" campaign, an initiative that was underway in other states and was working to identify service members and their families to help address suicide prevention. When Covid hit, the idea was temporarily shelved and then revived within the last couple of years.

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Berry credits Anthony McLeod, Associate Executive Director at the Governor’s Institute, for being the person who never let the concept die. “It was Anthony who said we need to go bigger ... It’s not only for the veteran, it’s also for the community. It’s about the state, federal and local government and about community organizations,” Berry recalled.

Although not a veteran herself, Kendra Danzer, Suicide Prevention Program Manager at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, has been involved with the campaign since the early discussions pre-Covid, and she is credited with designing the “Ask Me NC” logo and rack card.

“My husband and I moved to the Fort Bragg community about 14 years ago,” Danzer said. “My husband is a contract worker on Fort Bragg, working with a whole-health kind of program, I work in suicide prevention, and together we’ve become really involved with the whole Fort Bragg community.”

The value she sees in the “Ask Me NC” campaign is the way it unites all the resources and providers under one umbrella. “It’s so important for us to not work in silos and come together to create spaces that folks can easily navigate and get connected to services. It’s not a one-click-fits-all experience,” Danzer said.

Visitors to the website can quickly identify and access organizations and resources that are most relevant to their needs, which is important for day-to-day resources as well as to find emergency resources.

“Every crisis that people experience is different and every suicidal crisis is different. It’s never going to be the same for everyone so it’s important that we have this home base of resources and services where folks can find what they need for their specific situation,” she said.

The official launch was in November, but the “Ask Me NC” website had gone live in July, at the start of the state’s fiscal year. From that time until February, Miller says there have easily been over 10,000 visits to the website, more than 9,000 logged before Dec. 31st.

“If I had my wish, and the money to do whatever we wanted with this campaign, there would be “Ask Me NC” billboards in every single county, all the way from Murphy to Manteo,” Miller said.

The Game Changer

The next step is to spread awareness of “Ask Me NC” across local communities, and in Berry’s estimation the best way to do that is through county governments. “Where the buck stops, literally, is at the county level, and I want to get in front of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners,” he said. “If I get the governor’s proclamation into the hands of that association, there are a lot of those county commissioners that would ask what they must do to adopt “Ask Me NC.”

When it comes to Wake County – the county with the highest veteran population in the state — he’s preaching to the choir.



Paul Berry, Triangle Network Senior Director of Veterans Bridge Home.

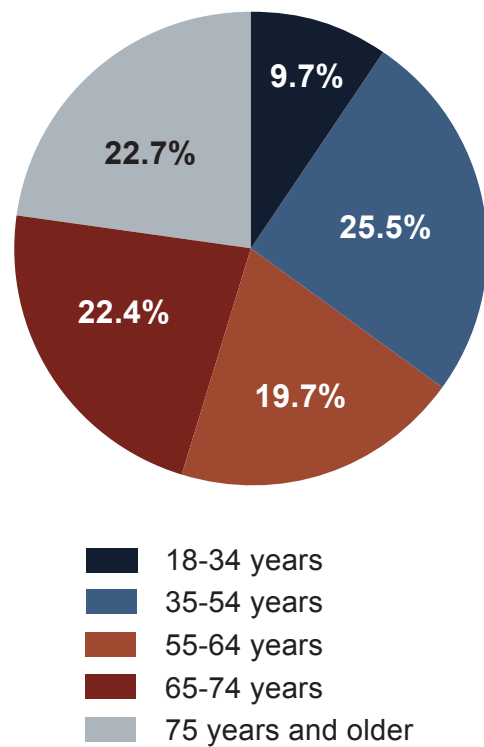
If you ask Siobhan Norris, Division Director for Veteran Services for Wake County, about the campaign, there’s no ambiguity in her answer: “‘Ask Me NC’ is going to be a game changer,” she stated. “Historically, as a community, we do not think to ask the question: ‘Have you served?’ Asking that question, and asking it the right way,” she said, is critical to making sure that veterans get the services they need.

Part of what “Ask Me NC” teaches is how to ask in a manner that will open the door for conversation. “You shouldn’t be asking: ‘Are you a veteran?’ Because sometimes even though they have worn the uniform and they are technically a veteran, they won’t identify as a veteran,” said Norris, hearkening back to Miller’s observations from her experiences. “Maybe they didn’t serve in combat. Maybe they’re an older female veteran and didn’t feel like they were recognized for their service even though they clearly served and wore the uniform,” Norris added. “Research has shown that asking the question: ‘Have you ever served in the U.S. armed forces?’ elicits a more accurate response.”

Norris, who served in the army as a military police soldier from 2000 to 2004, speaks as both a veteran and a service provider: “Whether they know it or not, veterans have a significant number of resources available to them. And as a county, if we’re not leaning into those resources and helping to educate the veteran and educate our community members, we’re doing our community a disservice,” she said. ■

NC Veterans Insights

North Carolina has the eighth largest veteran population in the nation, numbering more than 654,000 in 2019. Nationwide, the veteran population has been steadily declining for a decade, but as of 2024 the number of veterans in North Carolina numbered more than 615,500.



Source: wisevoter.com / census.gov / “North Carolina Veterans Insights Report,” North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

“Ask Me NC” simplifies access to resources for SMVF folks.

After serving almost 30 years in the Navy, Kayreen Gucciardo has been retired from active duty for four years and now serves as Veterans Services Coordinator for the NC Department of Health and Human Services. She is also a strong advocate of the “Ask Me NC” campaign and a leader on the committee that is advancing that initiative forward.

First, tell us about your military affiliations.

I’ve experienced about every facet of the family aspect. I was the child of a veteran, and I’ve been someone who deployed and had to leave their family behind as well as being the person who was left behind when their military spouse deployed. I was 26 years old when I joined the Navy, already married with a child, and then my daughter was born while I was on active duty. Later I was divorced, so I became a single parent on active duty in the military. And more recently, my son, who was an officer in Special Forces, was medically retired a year ago due to military-related conditions. So, I’ve got a wide range of military connections that help me empathize with service members and their families.

Specific to my service, I’m what’s called a mustang in the military — that’s when you are enlisted and then you convert to the commission corps. Being a mustang earns you a little respect when your sailors and other people see that you’ve got ribbons that can only be earned as an enlisted sailor. I still wear them as an officer because it’s like I earned my rank the hard way, and I bring a lot to the table because I have that enlisted experience and I have that officer experience.

What does your current position entail?

I work underneath Director Kelly Crosby in the Division of Mental Health at NC-DHHS and my position helps manage where the funding that we get under the Mental Health Block Grant is allocated to help support programs for veterans, military family programs, things like that. Fortunately, all the grants that I’m overseeing right now are funded through this fiscal year, which ends June 30th.

And what is your history with the “Ask Me NC” campaign?



Panelists from the “HealthCare Best Practices” session, Moderator Howard Lattimore of the NC Department of Public Instruction; Robin Kelleher of Hope for Warriors; Liz McCoy of Hope for Warriors; and Kayreen Gucciardo of NCDMHDDSUS. Photo courtesy: Association of Defense Communities.

I’ve only been in this position at NC-DHHS for about a year and a half and my predecessor had left the role a couple years prior so there hadn’t been anyone filling it for quite a while, but prior to Covid, they had tried to launch the “Ask the Question” campaign, which exists in other states across the U.S. After I got here the decision was made to be a little more definitive in our approach and we chose “Ask Me NC.” I met up with Paul Berry to work on it because we’re both veterans and both very passionate about this campaign, and we felt like we could make this happen.

It all started snowballing after we got NC-DHHS to give us the initial funding to have the rack cards printed and after Governor Stein signed off around Veterans Day on a proclamation which is like a call to action for support. Now we’re trying to get more funding from other sources because we’ll run out of swag soon and, ideally, we’d like to get some billboards up on the main roads throughout the state.

Where does the campaign stand now?

The official launch was November 8th, so it’s still in its infancy. We’re trying to get sponsors and businesses to fund more materials so we can have the rack cards to give away at events. To date, the only entity that has funded it is NC-DHHS, and we used that money for the

first round of materials. However, there are many key professionals across the state who’ve helped create materials, contributed ideas and supported the launch of “Ask Me NC.”

What are you working on to move it forward?

I’m talking to the State Consumer Family Advocacy Committee for North Carolina, which advises the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Use Services, other NC-DHHS agencies and the General Assembly. Our campaign committee can’t go to the House and say we want “Ask Me NC” on state documents. Or ask for the “Ask Me NC” logo to be included after signature lines on email communications. We can’t ask to have this referenced at the DMV, or on voter registration cards, or in public places. But a consumer advocacy group could lobby for some of those things. They appear to be totally on board with “Ask Me NC” and seem to be gearing up to lobby for it — it’s just a question of timing.

Have you investigated corporate partnerships?

We’re exploring ideas. We’ve discussed asking businesses and organizations if they’d be

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willing to pay for “Ask Me NC” billboards with their company logo included at the bottom as recognition. That’s one way we could have the “Ask Me NC” message out there, which would be great for spreading awareness and also connecting businesses with the military community. What company doesn’t want to support veterans and families? North Carolina has the [eighth largest] veteran population in the U.S. If we want to say we’re a military-friendly state, this is a great way to do it.

The cards and the slogan are catchy, but how do you get people to understand all that it means?

That’s something the team has been working on to make sure that people know this isn’t only awareness for veterans and people affiliated with the military, but it’s also an education piece for law enforcement, educators, healthcare providers — really anyone.

We’re talking about one out of every 10 or 12 people in North Carolina could be a veteran, so when you’re walking down the street, many people that you’re seeing are likely a veteran or military affiliated. And most of them probably don’t know about the benefits that are out there. Which is why we’ve done “Ask Me NC” and why it’s so important for us to try to get radio spots, TV spots, billboards, even window stickers in businesses.

The benefits process for veterans and their families can seem overwhelming. How does the campaign address that?

It’s a pretty simple ask and answer. Just “Ask Me NC.” The answer is you go to the website and find all the resources. When you go to that initial landing page, it simply asks: Have you or a family member ever served in the military? If your answer is yes, it guides you easily to resources with simple qualifiers: Are you a provider? An educator? A family member? A caregiver? Then you follow the dropdown menu to what you’re looking for—housing, food, employment, benefits.

Where do you see this going?

I’m hoping we continue to grow awareness. I’d really like to see the education piece come together because that’s vital. Without educating everyone about what benefits are available, we’re going to falter.

It is a twofold process — educating people

on why they need to ask the question but also educating people on why they need to answer the question.

From speaking with veterans, I know many are reticent to admit they served. Either they’re not sure they’re deserving of benefits, or they don’t feel like they earned them. I talk to people who say, ‘Well, I just did my couple years,’ or women who say, ‘I didn’t really deploy, I just did admin.’ But I tell them: You still raised your hand and served.

That’s another education piece we need—teaching folks who served that it doesn’t matter if you were in the Reserves or National Guard; if you’re male or female; or if you never deployed. You still served. You got a paycheck from Uncle Sam. You don’t have to have retired, been injured, served in combat, or carried a weapon. We’ve had the idea drilled into our heads that the only way you’re a real veteran is if you served 20 years and retired.

That’s why we frame the question as ‘Have you or a family member ever served?’ or ‘Have you or anyone you know ever served?’ We’re making it very broad. We don’t want anyone to be the judge of who is deserving or who might benefit.

How do we move past the question and into a deeper conversation?

I try to use the word affiliation. Are you affiliated with the military in any way? Do you know someone who’s affiliated with the military? It opens doors. And that’s especially useful if you’re in a profession — like an educator or health care provider or HR manager — where there’s a certain awareness we need when dealing with someone who is a veteran or family member. I’m not saying treat them with kid gloves, but it helps to know where they’re coming from.

For instance, if you’re in law enforcement and you ask, ‘Are you or a family member in the military or have you ever served?’ it opens the door for a conversation that could give you insight into their situation. It helps you meet them where they are and possibly address a situation before it escalates or things become serious. The point in asking is to have the conversation, but again, it’s a two-way street—the person has to be willing to answer.

The goal is to point people to resources, not to stand in judgement, correct?

Exactly. It doesn’t matter if the military

service was six months or six years. It doesn’t matter if it was an honorable or dishonorable discharge. They still served. Even if it was dishonorable, you don’t know why. But it could still be affecting them and could be indicative of their current situation — why they’re homeless, why they had a run-in with the law, why they are isolated.

I think back to when my daughter was in middle school. She was the only kid in her middle school who had a military mom that was always gone. I remember her coming home crying because girls were making fun of her. I went to the school to explain to the teacher and counselors, but back in the ‘90s, no one really cared. Now they actually talk about issues like this in schools. I’m glad these conversations are happening because it will make things easier for military families.

Where does this campaign fit into the greater scheme of information and resources for veterans in North Carolina?

I’m hoping it allows more veterans to access more of the benefits that are available. When I got out there were many resources I did not realize existed. And we offload so many people from the military into the civilian sector, like 200,000 every year, and many choose to retire in this state. “Ask Me NC” can be critically important to these veterans and retirees because it has everything on the platform.

In a perfect world, what I would love to see happen is that as each person leaves the military they would get assigned a Veteran Service Officer to help coach them. Everything is so overwhelming when you initially exit the military and, in the military, you’ve had everything right there — you’re used to a strong support system.

After you’re done in the military, it would be great to have that wraparound support — have a VSO reach out after six months to have a personal conversation. Ask you: Where are you at with your job, with housing, with your personal life, with your health and benefits?

Through all their exit classes service members get told so much information, it’s like a fire hose. But when you’re leaving, you’re worried about housing, about paying rent, getting a job, finding medical care. So many things are going through your head. “Ask Me NC” is intended to simplify all that — give you a place where you can find answers. ■

THE ART OF HEALING

A comfort zone and place to connect with people — among the strongest combatants against suicidality and exactly what The Joel Fund provides.

A pivotal turning point in John Sessoms' life was when he left his home of 48 years in Raleigh and moved to rural Wake County. But the more consequential turning point was when he went for coffee at The Joel Fund, which exists expressly for veterans like Sessoms, who spent 32 years in the North Carolina Army National Guard and deployed to Iraq.

The purpose of the Joel Fund is to provide a respite for healing, for hope and for fostering community. It's been that place for Sessoms, whose move — driven out of necessity and following a cancer diagnosis — left him largely isolated.

It's also been a place of healing for Brooke Dickhart, who founded the Joel Fund in honor of her father, a Navy SEAL who served four tours in Vietnam and retired after 20 years with two Bronze Stars and two Purple Hearts. Joe Silva, aka "Joel," also left with invisible wounds that never healed. In 2014 he became one of the 6,667 veterans who lost their life to suicide that year. Like Silva, most of those veterans, 65 percent, were over 50 years old according to the Vietnam Veterans Association.

Not a Clue

"I'm sure at some level my dad always had issues, but they weren't outwardly showing until around 10 years before he died; he was diagnosed with PTSD in his 50s," Dickhart said. "But I had no clue. No one ever talked to me about the suicide rate among veterans."

In hindsight there were signs of despair, driven largely by the loss of his support group. "A part of it was that group of SEALs were so tight knit and had good support amongst themselves. But as those men started to die, whether it was Agent Orange or just age in general, he really struggled," she said.

Six months before he died, she got a phone call that her father was missing. She travelled to Florida and finally found him.

"He was 120 pounds soaking wet and had broken ribs, but he swore to me that he'd hit rock bottom and was done," Dickhart said. A silver lining emerged as they began talking every Sunday, developing a level of



The Joel Fund gives veterans a space for connecting and reasons to engage, like this whittling class in the Operation Art program

closeness they'd never shared.

"We talked every week except for the Sunday before he died. It was right after Thanksgiving and I was traveling, so I felt like the rug had been ripped out from under me. And I was so angry," she said.

That anger was borne of her deep-seeded conviction that no one ever confronted the real source of her father's pain, his loneliness and enduring PTSD. Even when she accompanied her father to a counseling appointment at the VA, his psychiatrist said nothing about the signs of suicidality.

Out of overwhelming grief and anger emerged the vision for a community where veterans could find connection and support. Not clinical therapy, but a sanctuary with activities and events that would promote wellness and healing.

A Comfort Zone

Founded in 2015, the Joel Fund's most ambitious chapter is emerging now as the organization relocates into a permanent home in Rolesville's town center.

It's an even more convenient location for Sessoms, who attends the monthly coffee events without fail and is taking both in-person and online art classes. First it was photography classes, firmly in his comfort

zone since he has an associate's degree in commercial photography, and more recently a watercolor class.

"I don't need photography classes, but I do need people," he said. "For a long time, I was homebound and living out in the county I was all alone. The Joel Fund helped me find new friends and make connections again."

The organization was on track to be in its new space by March, with all its programs being run at a renovated 2,200-sq.-ft. home on that property. Programming includes the monthly Veterans Coffee Connection, Operation Art classes and Operation Connect events, as well as events hosted by community partners.

"Over the next couple of years, the plan is to develop a larger community center that could possibly incorporate apartments for veterans transitioning out of homelessness," Dickhart said. "We're working through all of that with a developer now, but it will all be at that same downtown site in Roseville where we have 1.6 acres."

With a 2026 operating budget of approximately \$500,000, The Joel Fund enters its tenth year with additional expansion plans, partnering with the Durham VFW post to run the day-to-day operations at its new location in Bragtown, which is expected to open in August. ■

TELLING THEIR STORIES WITHOUT WORDS

Veterans reveal deep truths through “nonfiction dance” performances with Black Box Dance Theatre.

While most of us watched history unfold across TV or computer screens, Alfredo Hurtado witnessed it first-hand. He enlisted in the Army on October 12, 2000, coincidentally the same day the USS Cole was bombed in Yemen. He walked out of the Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) in Brooklyn and looked across the New York City skyline, never imagining how dramatically it would be altered in less than a year.

By September, he was on his way to the smoldering Pentagon building, escorted up I-95 by Virginia State Troopers as his unit was among the first activated for Operation Noble Eagle. Seven months at the Pentagon were followed by nine months in Afghanistan and then, March 2003, he was in Iraq. The next month his Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb.

“I was injured, thankfully not that bad — I mean I took shrapnel to my head, to my face, had a traumatic brain injury, but I still have my limbs. I can still walk and run,” Hurtado said.

And he can dance. Hurtado can dance like nobody ever imagined — least of all himself.

Miracles in the Making

How he came to be a dancer, and a founding company member of Black Box Dance Theatre, a Raleigh-based modern dance company, is pure happenstance.

It started in a carpool line with one of those fleeting exchanges between a teacher and her student’s mom. Except this teacher was Diana Hurtado, sharing a CD of her husband’s music with Michelle Pearson, a professional dancer who toured the world performing, served on the faculty at the American Dance Festival and chose to settle in Raleigh with her family.

“Is there anything you’re working on that my husband could get involved with,” Hurtado asked.

Pearson calls the exchange “a miracle of the universe,” and found Alfredo’s music both dark and captivating.

“I was in this weird moment, leaving a D.C.-based dance company and wanting to get something started in North Carolina, and I



Professional dancer Deidre Smith Gilmore (2nd from right back row) helps lead Black Box Dance Theatre and hosts weekly workshops for veterans in her Asheville studio.

had all this work — choreographing, leading workshops, making dances — but I was looking for artists who, like me, were also interested in answering the bigger questions: What is the purpose of dance in our lives? In our community? Who is getting to dance and what are they dancing about?”

At the time she was serving as lead artist for a MetLife healthy living initiative, charged with bringing tools for health and wellness into disparate communities via dance. Scheduled to do a workshop for juvenile adolescent boys at a detention center in Greenville, North Carolina, her dilemma was how to get that group of boys to relate to a dancer and mother of three.

“I looked across that carpool line and standing over there was Alfredo, with an electric guitar slung over his shoulder and all those tattoos. And I’m thinking, there’s my answer,” Pearson recalls.

She was right, adolescent boys connected with Hurtado. More surprising was how profoundly he connected with them and with dance.

The workshops ran multiple days and on one of those days she needed another dancer to pair with a stronger-than-average boy, so she asked Hurtado to put down the guitar and join the dance.

“This kid, he had to be like 10 or 11 years old, and — I didn’t know how to dance — but I did it and it was the most amazing thing that I had ever experienced,” Hurtado said. “The trust that we had in each other — we’re pulling and supporting one another, and for him to let me lift him up — it was just amazing.”

Afterward he told Pearson: “There’s no way I stop this. I need to dance. I need to move.”

That was when they started envisioning Black Box Dance Theater, officially launched as a 501c3 nonprofit in 2014. Their mission is to create “human-centered dance experiences,” essentially what they’ve defined as “nonfiction dance,” that transform and connect individuals and communities.

The organization began with a group of artists who represented various communities and

vastly different life experiences. “We are all sitting around and sharing parts of ourselves and as we’re doing that Alfredo tells us this story about being blown up in Iraq and having traumatic brain injury ... the real-world reality of that. We created a dance from that story and it’s become a staple in our repertory,” said Pearson, founder and Artistic Director of Black Box Dance Theatre.

“Move to Action”

The performance starts with blunt text: “4 years, 9 months, 27 days” — the time of Hurtado’s military service. And then it leads into his narrative: “I remember waking up in a truck full of smoke. I remember blood trickling down my face. I remember returning to a world that I didn’t belong in anymore.”

Music starts and the dance begins. It’s a brief but impactful six-minute performance, one that resonates with middle school students as strongly as with octogenarian veterans.

“This is Alfredo’s story, but it’s also Diana’s story, it’s also the troops’ story and it’s also my story,” Pearson said. “It’s anyone’s story who is a part of the military community that we think is just about a veteran, when it’s so much bigger.”

That’s the feedback they get time and again. When “Move to Action” was performed during a Creative Forces symposium held at Camp Lejeune, a Vietnam veteran approached Pearson afterwards, tears in his eyes, and told her: “I’ve never seen anything like that. I’ve never seen my story like that.”

That veteran was Stephen Henderson, who hosts a virtual writing group for veterans, is a leading participant in the weekly Black Box Dance Theatre (BBDT) workshops held in Asheville and has become a key collaborator with BBDT. Classes and workshops hosted by BBDT provide opportunities for veterans and the military affiliated communities to explore movement as a medium for storytelling, stress relief and intimate connection.

“Around 2016, we were asked to lead a workshop for active-duty soldiers at Fort Bragg. Alfredo’s like, hell yeah. Everybody else was like, this is so crazy; but four of us went down there wearing our little dance T-shirts for what they call a warrior reset,” Pearson said. “The folks at this warrior reset were there for one of two reasons. Either they’d been tapped as a leader, or they were there because they were barely making it.



Black Box Dance Theatre co-founders Alfredo Hurtado and Michelle Pearson

The reset is about leadership, but it’s also about suicide prevention.”

The workshop was a resounding success and across the next six years they held multiple warrior resets across numerous locations: Camp Lejeune, Fort Bragg, Seymour Johnson, the Coast Guard, the National Guard in Greensboro. The momentum around Black Box and around dance as a medium for connection and revelation kept building.

“I think that there is something in the fact that we’re not trying to fix anyone, we’re not trying to be therapists. The dance process is rigorous and we’re there for a shared purpose,” Pearson said. “We’re making a piece. We have a show, and that show is reality.”

There is no pretense or acting; the emotion and authenticity of the dance performances have depth and substance. “We’re not pretending, the dancers and the people watching know it is truth,” she said. “All the arts are humanizing and healing in their way, but there’s something about dance that is an actual physical connection. This isn’t a metaphoric connection. This is real.”

For Hurtado, dance has become his language. It’s a way of looking “from the outside in,” so that now he isn’t afraid to tell the stories. “The thing that Michelle had me do at that first workshop in Greenville where I had to pull that kid, I had to lift him. For me, the [hardest] thing was I had to touch him,” Hurtado said.

“All I could think was: These hands have done evil things. I don’t want to pass that on

to someone else. But, in that moment, I felt this innocence of something that I’d never experienced,” he said. “When I supported him, he was supporting me even more. And that’s when I realized, I need to know more, I need to trust this process.”

Black Box Dance Theatre has continued to introduce new and meaningful performances.

“The Patriot Project” is an ongoing and evolving work of evening performances where veterans and civilians unite to share in the power of dance as a reflection of truth, empathy and healing.

Deidre Smith Gilmer, who grew up dancing with Pearson in Raleigh, helps lead the Asheville Patriot Project and hosts weekly workshops at her studio in Asheville.

“The classes in Asheville are a beautiful blueprint of this work we’re doing, how impactful it is and how it needs to continue,” Hurtado said. “Because healing isn’t something we finish; it’s an ongoing journey to find peace.”

That journey has been extended to a larger audience, as the work from BBDT is being recognized and shared nationally. A new documentary anthology series, “I Feel Myself to be Part of Something,” is being created by Tony Award-winning producer Mara Isaacs and will include five films that explore how arts are shaping and redefining communities across the U.S. One of the hour-long segments in the series features Black Box Dance Theatre in a powerful tribute to the resilience of veterans.

The film, “We Lift Each Other,” follows a group of veterans from their initial meeting in a dance workshop to a courageous performance that showcases their transformation from isolation to connection.

The premiere of “We Lift Each Other” debuted Nov. 10th in Asheville and featured many of the veterans who participate in the weekly BBDT workshops in western NC. It has since been shared in other cities, including Cary, Greenville and Winston-Salem.

On May 2nd, “We Lift Each Other” will have its Raleigh premiere at the Rialto on Glenwood Avenue. Admission is free but reservations are required as seating is limited for the 7 p.m. showing.

When production is complete on the entire “I Feel Myself to be Part of Something,” anthology, the documentary series is expected to air on PBS. ■



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