

Managing the transition to civilian life

Chaunte: My name is Chaunte. I was active duty Air Force for 10 years, and I was OIF, OEF. I am now a United States Air Force reservist, and I'm an E-6. I had a supervisor at the very beginning who tried to take advantage of situations. And I was very young at the time, so I never really said anything. I never came out and wanted to basically tell on him. I'm a very strong Christian, so I believe what comes around goes around and God will always take care of it. And a year later, the same guy that tried to take advantage of me ended up he was taking advantage of other airmen and he actually got put in prison. So, he was taken care of.

Another situation, I had a supervisor who was just, he was hateful. He was always mean. He was very hard on me. And I took it, even though I was successful at my job. I had won many awards early on in the Air Force. I did a very good job, so I knew I was confident in my job. And I kind of ignored him. And one day I finally snapped, and I told him, "Would you treat your wife, your child, your grandmother, your aunt, any of these women in your life, would you treat this way?" I was like, "Because I am somebody's daughter. I am somebody."

And it's the way that men either try to come across very hard, I think, or they come across as condescending and they're going to try to lure you into their bedroom. So, it's a lot of times one spectrum to the other. And it's a learning process.

I was finished with active duty in May of '09, and I had a lot of challenges as far as brand-new city, brand-new home. And I found myself at first waking up at 0430, getting to the gym by 0500. I started training clients immediately, and I would get home at 9 or 10 o'clock at night. And that was kind of, I guess, how I coped was when I was deployed, I worked, you work the 12-hour shifts or you're always busy. When you're in the military active duty, you're always busy.

So, I was used to the go, go, go lifestyle. And it was in those moments when I settled down where it got difficult, where I started realizing the circle of friends that I had weren't the same. And civilian women, the things that they're concerned with kind of seemed trivial to me. The going shopping, the getting the nails done, complaining about a bad Frappuccino. I started feeling anger build up inside. And I still wouldn't share with anybody.

I would come home, and I would make sure every dish was clean. I would pack lunches. And I want everything in a specific place. My bed is made every morning. And they would say one thing to me and in all honesty, I would just start crying. I would break down.

It's sad, but I don't get enough sleep. And I've tried, but you do, you get a lack of sleep. And it doesn't matter sometimes how many years go by, but you stay up at night and you think and a lot of things bother you that you don't always let out because you feel insecure and you feel that you can't talk about it.

With me, it's the images of the soldiers coming back from Iraq and just the dirty, tired, sad faces. And just remembering how worn-out they looked. And that image just haunted me. And I guess coming from being a combat lifesaver and coming from that perspective, I've seen men who dealt with just trauma and all the hardships they face.



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So, on a day to day basis and dealing with people who complain, like I said, about the little things, I'm sitting there with these images in my mind thinking, really? That bothers you?

When you first get out of the Air Force and deciding what you're going...or the military in general, it is very hard to know what you want to do. I wanted to enroll in school, and I thought, no, I need to go into a school. I need to have a classroom setting. And I found that with me getting back from deployments, getting out of the military so quickly, I didn't want to be in a classroom setting with other kids who were younger. Because honestly, at 27 years old, I felt like a failure. I felt like I joined the Air Force to get my degree and then September 11th happened, and time runs away from you. And deployment after deployment or moving, you end up not finishing a degree. So, I felt less than.

And when my father told me about the program with GCU, I called the VA to get my GI Bill and I got things rolling. I got all the help I needed immediately. The biggest thing for me that's been a struggle is walking in to get a job now and finishing my degree and having my accolades, all my accomplishments and feeling like I'm an E-6 in the United States Air Force and walking into a room with confidence. I've had troops. I've had people that I've taken care of.

And now walking in to get a job, I feel at times that I'm looked at...I'm judged quickly. You know, whether it's because I'm a blonde to how I've done my makeup to I'm in a dress, it depends on who's doing the hiring process, but I've had a lot of issues with that. And I actually called my father one day and I was in tears because I told him I feel like as a woman it's so hard to either you deal with jealousies and insecurities or again, you deal with a man who is trying to sleep with you. There's no in-between. And you realize that it has to be you and I have to come across stronger.

I would tell my fellow Veterans you can't do it alone. We served together since basic training. Since the day we joined, we had a battle buddy. And you have to realize when you get out you have to find that battle buddy. So, how do you connect? How do you find someone? And that's when I found different organizations from looking up. Whether it's with the VA, Soldiers' Angels. I did start with my church, and I found that the more that I felt needed, I felt secure.

You have to get out and find where you're needed. And you have to know that other Veterans need you. We can't do it alone. And that's the bottom line. I wish people would wake up and realize that. That in their loneliest nights, there are people who care and there are people that want to connect.



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