

‘Finding Someone You Can Trust is Instrumental’

Veterans attending school at Washington University in St. Louis give advice to new student veterans: Join the school’s Student Veterans of America chapter

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As many college students start the fall 2019 semester, Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapters are gearing up to support military-affiliated students during their higher education endeavors.

SVA has a presence at many of the country’s top universities, including Washington University in St. Louis. The school’s veterans’ organization, Washington University Student Veterans (WUVets), is just one of more than 1,500 chapters across the country.

Army veteran Angela Peacock, a former student at Washington University, graduated with a master’s degree in social work with a concentration in mental health this year and was the 2018-19 WUVets president. Peacock, a member of VFW Post 5077 in O’Fallon, Mo., also was a finalist for Student Veterans of America’s 2018 Student Veteran of the Year.

Besides being one of the top SVA members, Peacock also received special recognition and a unique opportunity courtesy of VFW. Earlier this year, she was selected to participate in the VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship. While in Washington, D.C., in March for the VFW’s annual Legislative Conference, Peacock worked on her individual project, which is required of all VFW-SVA fellows. Her focus was on what she said is the “over prescription” of benzodiazepine medications, such as Xanax or Valium, to veterans. Benzodiazepine treats patients’ anxiety and insomnia.

Peacock said the epidemic of over prescribing veterans relates to “poor outcomes” for veterans, including suicide.

“A lot of veterans are on too much medication, and they don’t know which medication is doing what for them,” Peacock said. “They don’t know what the original problem is, and

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they don't know what problems are side effects of their medication.”

In 1998, Peacock joined the Army as a communication systems operator. She medically retired in 2004 after she was deployed to Iraq for the 2003 invasion with the 141st Signal Battalion.

SVA Helps Vets ‘Navigate’ School

Peacock attended St. Charles Community College in Missouri beginning in 2011 and obtained an associate's degree in general studies. She went on to earn her bachelor's degree in psychology at Washington University before becoming a graduate student. Peacock said she has been involved with SVA nearly as long as the organization had been in existence.

“When I went to the SVA conference in 2012, there were only about 400 to 500 people there,” Peacock said. “It wasn't a robust organization like it is now. There were still wars going on, so there wasn't as much transitioning going on.”

Peacock said one of the most important things for a new student veteran to do at their school is find the campus' student veterans community to “help navigate” life as a college student.

“There are so many tasks to do that it is overwhelming,” Peacock said. “It is especially overwhelming if you are a brand new student out of the military.”

Peacock's second recommendation is to find a mentor who understands veterans and their disabilities.

“Finding someone you can trust is instrumental,” Peacock said. “I had to find faculty members that I could go to, to set goals with and vent to. Every single day was hard for me. I think the reason I have such high grades is because I had to work my ass off for it. To fully understand the material, I had to throw myself into it to get it.”

Air Force Reserve Technical Sgt. Derek Hendrix, a student at Washington University, said he recommends new students look into their education benefits, not only from VA but from different states, such as the Hazlewood Act in Texas and the Missouri Returning Heroes' Education Act.

“New student veterans should research their benefits,” Hendrix said. “I guarantee people will find more than they ever thought was available to them.”

Hendrix, who deployed to Saudi Arabia in 2003 with the 48th Fighter Wing and Afghanistan in 2007 with the 27th Fighter Wing, attended St. Louis Community College and The University of Missouri-St. Louis before transferring to Washington University last year. He plans to obtain bachelor's degrees in economics, as well as industrial and organizational

psychology.

“I used tuition assistance to cover costs of general education classes, then transferred to Washington University to use the Forever GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon Program,” Hendrix said. “It’s been a way for me to fully use all my benefits so that I can get as much of my education covered as possible.”

This article is featured in the September 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.