

‘I’ve Always Wanted to Help Others’

A former Navy drill instructor and VFW Life member has made it her mission to advocate for the homeless, including women veterans

Mar 10, 2021

Lalena Magnetta, a Life member of VFW Post 2245 in Grayslake, Illinois, has made it her life’s work to help others. At 38 years old, Magnetta said that her service to and advocacy for others has only just begun.

Magnetta, who served as a Navy aviation electronics technician, earned her VFW eligibility during a deployment to the Persian Gulf in 2006-07 aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69).

Before leaving the Navy in 2012, Magnetta served at Naval Station Great Lakes in northeast Illinois as a recruit division commander, a drill instructor for Navy recruits.

“It was a very arduous duty with long hours,” Magnetta said. “But it really was the best job I’ve ever had.”

Magnetta said that even though she advanced to petty officer 1st class during her almost 12-year Navy career, she wanted to achieve more in her civilian life.

“It was my time to start a new chapter with my family and education,” Magnetta said.

After her honorable discharge in 2012, Magnetta went on to earn two master’s degrees. She has a business administration (MBA) degree from California’s University of Redlands and a global supply chain management degree from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

HELPING WOMEN VETERANS

Magnetta said that one of the achievements she is proudest of was participating in Ms. Veteran America, an annual competition that showcases women veterans who continue to serve after their military careers.

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“When I found out about Ms. Veteran America and that they were helping homeless women veterans and their children, I wanted to be a part of that,” Magnetta said. “I’ve always wanted to help others.”

In 2018, Magnetta competed in Ms. Veteran America and was one of the finalists. The next year, she placed second runner up.

“But I’m still a winner,” Magnetta said. “I was able to advocate for women veterans as an ambassador for Ms. Veteran America, and that’s all I could ask for.”

The proceeds from the Ms. Veteran America competition goes to Final Salute, an organization that provides women in need of safe housing.

“It’s heartbreaking to think about all these women who served our country and now are homeless — especially those with children,” Magnetta said. “There are so many reasons for their situation, such as sexual trauma they had during their military service or other factors that play a role in causing post-traumatic stress.”

Magnetta also cited lack of support from family and ineligibility for or lack of knowledge of VA benefits for the women veterans’ homeless population.

“Now my passion for this has evolved into helping homeless veterans and nonveterans — men or women,” Magnetta said. “I just want to help everybody.”

This issue hits close to home for Magnetta. She was homeless before joining the military. Magnetta said she left an abusive home when she was a teenager.

‘I KNEW I WAS CAPABLE OF MORE’

Growing up in Las Vegas, Magnetta had a troubled childhood living with her father and stepmother. Magnetta decided to leave home due to mistreatment caused by her parents’ drug use.

“I just wasn’t getting what I needed to grow up and become an adult,” Magnetta said. “I had to leave for my own good.”

After leaving Las Vegas, she traveled to New Mexico and Colorado to find a way to support herself. She recalled having to sleep in a sleeping bag in the desert for a period.

“I remember at one point when I was 16 years old I ended up in Durango, Colorado, where I wasn’t even old enough to be in a homeless shelter,” Magnetta said. “I was living in a tent behind the shelter because I wasn’t officially allowed to be there. I had to have people bring me food while I stayed outside.”

Magnetta eventually ended up in Denver working odd jobs and living in temporary housing. This is when she said she “had enough” of the lifestyle.

“I called my grandma and asked her if I could live with her,” Magnetta said. “I wanted to do right by her and told her that I wanted to get my life together by joining the military. I just needed a way out of my situation. I knew I was capable of more.”

Her grandmother agreed, and Magnetta traveled by bus to Minnesota. Magnetta lived there for a year while she was in the Navy’s delayed entry program.

“It took me five waivers to join the Navy,” Magnetta said. “At the time, I didn’t have a high-school transcript because I didn’t even complete one year of high school. And, I only had a GED (General Education Development, which are tests taken as an alternative to a high school diploma).”

Magnetta said she wants to use the “challenges and obstacles” she has overcome in her life as an example for others.

“We all make mistakes, and everything happens for a reason,” Magnetta said. “I want to use my experiences as a way to guide others who are struggling.”

FINDING HER ‘TRIBE’ AT THE VFW

Magnetta now resides in Grayslake, about 40 miles north of downtown Chicago. She joined VFW during her time at Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes.

Magnetta said joining VFW has been a great way to serve her community.

“When we all eventually leave the military, we have a place at VFW where we can affiliate ourselves with other veterans,” Magnetta said. “In other words, it’s where veterans can find their tribe. That’s why I love being a part of VFW. The VFW contains a wealth of knowledge. It can be that place we go to get help and find out where we can help others.”

Magnetta said that now more than ever, women need to join and be active in VFW.

“The highlight needs to be on women right now,” Magnetta said. “There still is a lot of work to be done.”

As an example, Magnetta noted that many people have assumed she was the wife of a veteran, rather than a veteran herself.

“The statistics are staggering when it comes to women veterans,” Magnetta said. “Many don’t use the VA health care system because they don’t feel valued. Most women who are homeless are veterans with children. Now is the time we need to make our voice heard, and

one of those ways is joining the VFW.”

Magnetta’s service to others now has gone beyond her military career and advocacy for homeless veterans. Last year, she was appointed to the Grayslake Village Board of Trustees. Magnetta said she wants to continue helping others and her community in any way she can.

“I’m honored to be in this role and be a representative for my community,” Magnetta said. “I want to do my part and do what’s best for our village residents and businesses.”

This article is featured in the March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.