

Twenty-Year-Old Takes Command of Her Local VFW

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At 20 years old, Tasha DeBlois to some would appear to be just starting her adult life. That is until they get to know the United States military veteran, a National Guard Military Police officer, pow wow vendor and participant, college student and recently named commander of her local Veterans of Foreign Wars Branch.

“I don’t look like what a lot of people expect a veteran to look like,” she said from her home in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. The Blackfoot citizen, who’s Indian name means Beautiful Woman—tattooed across her abdomen—has her family tree tattooed on her back and served in Iraq (Ubaydi, Military Police, 2009 and 2010) where she sustained a permanent injury from a non-combat situation.

She remains in the Army National Guard Military Police, however, and was recently sent to the nearby towns of Monson and Springfield, Massachusetts to help in the recovery from the tornadoes that caused 300 injuries, four deaths, and millions in property damage.

Her fondness of military duty started at a young age. DeBlois grew up making and selling crafts and dancing at pow wows in the Massachusetts area. She had years of experience watching and then participating in the area’s style of grand entry where the first three songs honor all veterans. She also grew up to respect the elderly and took annual trips to Florida to visit her grandparents. When she was old enough, she worked alongside her grandmother in an elder care facility.

At a recent powwow where her parents were selling such items as rattles, hair ties, sage and custom regalia services, her father, Jim DeBlois, declared that Tasha is not the only woman veteran in the country to command a VFW, but she is the youngest.

Tasha took over command of Post 794 Lieut. Laurence S. Ayer Post VFW in Fitchburg and has experience when it comes to organizations dedicated to a specific group.

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Tasha's parents were active in the [United Native American Cultural Center](#) (UNACC) at former Fort Devens in north-central Massachusetts.

According to its website, UNACC was established in 1990 by World War II veteran (and D-Day, Normandy Beach survivor) Onkwe Tase, Mohawk. A former Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Massachusetts, he petitioned legislators and others to include a veterans' center in land use plans for the base.

Tasha's parents were among the people who brought their children to the successfully established center, which became the only multi-tribal veterans' nonprofit cultural center known to exist on a decommissioned army base, according to press releases from 1990.

She spent most of her youth going to the center, where on Wednesday and Saturday evenings people worked on crafts together at long tables and ended the evening drumming and singing together. People from the cultural center, including her, visited schools to present cultural programs, appeared in parades, and offered lessons on and taught one another, how to bead, make dream catchers, rattles and more.

Many people credit Tasha's mother, Mary, with teaching them how to bead, and her father was with the center's drum for many years as well as its vice president, adding children's programs and museum displays to the list of services the center offered.

While growing up, DeBlois crafted and danced alongside veterans of World War II, the Korean conflict, Vietnam, and Desert Storm. The people, both families and individuals, who sought friendship from other Natives and other veterans at the center were from the Abenaki, Mi'kmaq, Inupiaq, Mohawk, Lakota, Blackfoot, Cherokee, Diné, and Anishinaabe tribes as well as people of European descent.

Tasha witnessed another program that linked UNACC with veterans from the Bedford, Massachusetts Veterans Hospital who hailed from North Dakota and South Dakota, Alaska and Oklahoma. These veterans' recoveries included visits to the cultural center as a way to provide a place for ceremony and to meet east coast Natives, according to its present secretary.

In 2003, Tasha saw the center volunteers struggle to keep the center open as the building owners wanted to relocate the veterans to a smaller building in order to lease the larger space. Veterans from all over the country united in their support and Tasha and her family along with the others were able to continue in the larger space.

DeBlois graduated from Fitchburg High School, class of 2008, and immediately enlisted with the National Guard.

In an interview with her hometown newspaper, DeBlois explained that her plans with the

VFW are to build membership. “I want to reach out to veterans so they are aware of the services and scholarships that are available to them.”

In the meantime, her life reflects that of so many other youth: her family grieves the recent loss of a beloved father and grandfather. There is her job in a local convenience store, Guard duty, and full-time course work at Fitchburg State University where she is majoring in psychology. And wedding plans for her older sister, Shanna, for whom she is maid of honor.