

'I Knew That Was What I Wanted to Do'

A doctor of physical therapy and VFW Life member has worked with a variety of patients in the Kansas City area, including veterans, for their pelvic health care needs

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Iraq War veteran Trisha McCulloch said she struggled with pelvic health issues through most of her seven-year Army career and beyond. But at the time, she didn't know what was wrong.

McCulloch said that during her first year of service, she suffered military sexual trauma, or MST, after being sexually assaulted. McCulloch said that gradually, she started showing other symptoms from MST.

"Slowly over time, I started to develop pelvic pain issues," said McCulloch, who served in the Army from 1999 to 2006. "It started out with having pain during intercourse and issues with my pelvic tissue. These are conditions that are very common. They can build over time and become very impairing."

The former staff sergeant and CH-47D Chinook crew chief said that she visited several doctors about the pain she endured. None of them could find anything wrong.

"They made me feel like I was crazy," McCulloch said. "I actually had one physician tell me to my face that if she didn't find anything wrong with me, she would send me to mental health. I remember bursting into tears and kicking her out of the office. I knew deep down that I was not crazy or making anything up — they just didn't know what they were looking for."

During active-duty service, McCulloch earned an associate degree. After her discharge from active-duty service, McCulloch continued to pursue a bachelor's degree, then a doctorate's degree at Armstrong State University in Savannah, Georgia. All of it, she said, was to become a doctor of physical therapy.

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PAVING THE WAY FOR OTHERS

As a student, McCulloch wanted to pursue a career in physical therapy. She had always been gung-ho about specializing in sports medicine and orthopedics. That was until McCulloch started studying the topic of pelvic health therapy.

McCulloch said that she didn't realize what was wrong with her until she was a student at physical therapy school.

"I was blown away," McCulloch said. "I had no idea that the field existed and that my own problems could be due to issues with my pelvic floor. (The pelvic floor supports areas such as the bladder, uterus and bowels.) From then on, my career took a hard-right turn. I thought, 'This is what I want to do now.'"

McCulloch said she decided to go through her current career path because she not only wanted to help herself but help others like herself who struggle and think they are alone and have nowhere to turn.

McCulloch said that at the time, she started talking to her primary care physician at the VA hospital in Savannah about pelvic health therapy. McCulloch said the doctor had never heard of it.

"I told her that it was physical therapy but for the pelvis," McCulloch said. "I remember loading her up with research articles and books about it."

McCulloch said that it took her and her doctor eight months to get through the VA's red tape and receive a referral to be seen by a pelvic health therapist.

"Because of all the hard work that was put into it, it paved the pathway for other people like myself to easily receive care from the local health care therapists in Savannah."

A Kansas City metropolitan area native, McCulloch said she worked with pelvic health patients while she was a student. Out of school, McCulloch started working in Hartford, Connecticut, as a physical therapist. She later started working closer to home in Leavenworth, Kansas, where she said she worked at a clinic that cared for many veterans through the VA health care system.

In 2017, McCulloch started working for the University of Kansas Health System, based in Kansas City, Kansas. She helped implement its current pelvic health therapy program.

"The University of Kansas Health System went for a very long time without a program," McCulloch said. "I ended up learning from a friend that KU wanted to start the program, and at that point, I thought that it was a perfect opportunity for me."

A COMMUNITY LEADER

McCulloch is a Life member of VFW Post 7397 in Lenexa, Kansas. Post 7397 Commander David DeWitt said even with McCulloch's busy schedule, she still makes the time to visit the Post and has become an active member of the Post's Riders.

"Trisha's story, amazing fortitude and dedication to helping others can help serve as an inspiration to other veterans," DeWitt said. "She is dedicated to helping others and has risen above her traumatic event to become a leader in our community."

McCulloch said she grew up around the Lenexa Post with many family members who were members of the Kansas Post.

"I grew up running around the Lenexa VFW Post," McCulloch said. "I joined the Post because it made me feel nostalgic. I always feel welcome at the Lenexa VFW."

This article is featured in the 2022 March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiwa](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.