

# VFW Member Opens One-of-a-Kind Museum in Pennsylvania

## A retired Army sergeant major created the Keystone State's only women veterans museum to help ensure women vets are no longer 'invisible'

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Claudette Williams was attending a sergeant major reunion in Texas in 2019 when she was approached by someone asking if she had accompanied her sergeant major husband to the event. Having served more than 30 years in the Army Reserve before retiring as a sergeant major, Williams was incensed, but not surprised.

When she returned to her home in Mount Pocono, Pennsylvania, she decided to recognize the service and sacrifice of women veterans. On June 9, 2019, Williams opened the Women Veterans Museum — the only museum in Pennsylvania dedicated to honoring female vets.

“We expected about 40 people to show up for the official opening,” Williams said. “We ended up with 120 people. It is our goal to make sure women veterans are no longer invisible. Women have given to this country, and we need to be acknowledged.”

Located in Mount Pocono, the museum aims to showcase the “pivotal roles women veterans have played on and off the battlefield,” said Williams, senior vice commander of VFW Post 509 in Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania.

Mannequins display uniforms through the ages. There are areas with flags, military awards and antiquities.

Additionally, Williams said there are two “safe space” rooms for visitors who may need it.

“We also provide transitional and mental health resources for women vets,” she added. “Transitioning from the military back to civilian life can be difficult.”

Operated by a team of volunteers, the museum is open Thursday to Sunday.

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## **VFW ‘FELT LIKE GOING HOME’**

Born in Jamaica and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Williams enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1985 because she was not sure what she was wanting to do in life.

“Join the military, see the world,’ that’s what the commercials said,” Williams recalled. “It wasn’t really like that. I packed for the military as though I was going on vacation. I had my little Louis Vuitton bag and my matching clothes.”

By 1996, Williams had three children, including a set of twins. She decided to “take a break” from the military life given her twins were babies. A couple of years later, she moved her children to Mount Pocono.

Following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Williams was called back to duty. In 2003, the single mom left her 7-year-old twins and 15-year-old daughter behind with family and close friends to deploy to Kuwait with her transportation unit.

“The first two weeks there, I cried,” Williams said. “In July 2004, I came home on leave for my daughter’s sweet 16. It was hard to go back after those two weeks.”

She internalized her departure back to Kuwait knowing she was serving for her children. When she came home in April 2005, it was as if everything had changed.

“I was lost,” Williams said. “My family had their own life. My twins had turned 9. It was very difficult.”

Williams said going through that transition is why the Women Veterans Museum’s transitional resources are important.

In March 2011, she was called up to go to Bahrain. The anxieties of leaving her family resurfaced. It was especially crushing when, after telling her children she was leaving, her daughter replied, “That’s okay, we are used to it.”

While it was challenging raising a family and deploying twice, Williams said she would not trade any of those experiences or memories.

“It gave me a chance to give back to my country,” Williams said. “It gave me a chance to mentor soldiers who are now excellent leaders.”

When she retired in 2014, Williams returned to school to become a social worker. She became president of the Mount Pocono Borough Council and a commissioner with the Pocono Mountain Regional Police.

Williams also joined the VFW after her retirement, even though years earlier after her first

deployment she had tried to join.

“When I came to Post 509 in 2014, it felt like going home,” Williams said. “The reception I received was welcoming. We are truly a family who cares about what happens to veterans and their families.”

At the museum, copies of VFW magazine are displayed for visitors to peruse.

Williams’ son, Kwame Gadson, is a police officer in Atlanta and serves in the Army Reserve. Her sister, Carol, served 24 years in the Army and retired as a master sergeant. With the 82nd Airborne, she also was a drill instructor at Ft. Jackson, Georgia.

“The military offers a sense of pride, service and leadership,” Williams said. “And it is like a family as you leave together, serve together and come home together.”

To learn more about the Women Veterans Museum, visit [www.thewomenveteransmuseum.com](http://www.thewomenveteransmuseum.com).

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