

'It Really Saved My Life'

An Afghanistan War veteran and Mrs. America Pageant winner from Oregon uses her new platform for veterans' advocacy and fighting homelessness

Aug 28, 2023

When she joined the Mrs. America Pageant on a whim last year, Valerie Webb was encouraged to find a platform that aligned with her beliefs and passions.

As an Afghanistan War veteran who spent eight years in the Navy before getting out in 2013, Webb knew it would need to benefit veterans and especially those who are homeless.

"I thought hard about it, so I thought one would have to be about veterans," said Webb, a member of VFW Post 2666 in Hillsboro, Oregon. "I was homeless at one point, for a year-and-a-half, in 2005, so I wanted to help and create awareness for that population as well."

The reigning Mrs. Oregon America, who today is a mother of four boys, an assistant pastor at a children's ministry center and an avid volunteer at Post 2666, chose an ambassador role for Soles4Souls and The Mission Continues.

Both nonprofits focus on Webb's core beliefs, impacting veterans and homeless persons alike.

"Soles4Souls turns unwanted shoes and clothing into opportunities for those suffering from poverty," said Webb, who helped collect more than 2,000 pounds of shoes and clothes last year. "And The Mission Continues connects veterans with under-resourced communities. Their programs deploy volunteers to improve educational resources, tackle food insecurity and foster neighborhood identity."

In working alongside both nonprofits, Webb is paying forward a blessing that at one point unshackled her from addiction and homelessness as a teenager in Glendale, Arizona.

Long before the beauty pageant success and a bachelor's degree in health care services from the University of Phoenix, the then-23-year-old Webb was gripped by a methamphetamine

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addiction and relegated to her car after being thrown out of her mother's house.

"I was a meth addict, homeless and having to beg friends to let me crash at their place from time to time," Webb said. "It was at the height of knowing I had no place to call home that I joined the Navy, and it really saved my life."

Webb went to a recruiter in late 2005 and enlisted. As if uncuffed from a dark and looming future, Webb's trajectory spun in another direction — she kicked her addiction and met her husband in the Navy, married, and adapted the military's core beliefs as her own.

"It was my choice to join, but I did so because I needed a drastic change," Webb said. "I recovered while I was in and met my husband, who at the time was in for five years. It was a wonderful experience, to be honest."

The couple and their children moved to Oregon following a job opportunity Webb's husband received, which according to her, was too good to refuse. They set roots down little by little in Hillsboro, about 20 miles west of Portland, and Webb was soon drawn to service in and around her community as a means to enrich her newfound purpose.

Today, she also participates in VFW Buddy Poppy drives and tries to attend and host breakfasts on Saturdays with her husband. They are regular volunteers at blood drives hosted by Post 2666 as well as other fundraising events in the community.

But with the advent of her public personality as Mrs. Oregon America, a title she's passing onto the next winner later this month, Webb also has used the opportunity to encourage other women and especially women veterans.

"I try to urge them to never stop serving," Webb said. "Once they get out of the military, I encourage them to find their inner survivalist. I have to constantly remind myself that I am a survivor. I have been a survivor of many things. It leaves a large void once we leave the military, so this gives us purpose."

Following her reign as Mrs. Oregon America, Webb plans to continue as an ambassador and volunteer at Soles4Souls and The Mission Continues, where she's taken a role as leader of a Portland "platoon."

Webb also serves dinner at the Portland Rescue Mission and acts as a local Adopt One Block ambassador, helping round up volunteers to keep her community clean.

"It feels so much easier to fall into depression and isolate yourself when we leave the military because we no longer feel like we have a mission or a purpose," Webb said. "But by getting involved in community service and surrounding ourselves with like-minded individuals, we continue to serve our country, in a new and different way."

This article is featured in the 2023 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.