

Emma-Claire Foster
Fall 2025 Semester

Helping a Heritage of Heroism

Helping a Heritage of Heroism (HHH) was birthed out of my love for learning about the military and my care for the older population. My parents – both Navy veterans – raised me to love my country, always be five minutes early, say thank you to those who have served, have a strong work ethic, and enjoy military stories. I also noticed in my peers that this same level of appreciation for the military is not reciprocated in much of the young American population. My experience of watching my grandfather, who was also a veteran, pass away in a lonely environment broke my heart. This combined with my job in the last year caretaking for geriatric individuals struggling with dignity, relationships, and purpose led to the realization that I could do something to help both issues. Thus, a mentorship program between the younger generation and older military veterans to discuss military experience and life lessons was created.

At the start of the fall semester, I attempted to call several independent living facilities in the Auburn area to inform veterans of this opportunity. I also printed out flyers with the design below.



I distributed these to an independent living facility hoping to hear a quick response of interested individuals. I learned through trial-and-error that these were not effective marketing strategies. So, I then contacted veteran organizations at Auburn University who then connected me with more organizations. Through this networking, I was encouraged by many people loving the idea of this mentorship program, and I was introduced to Mrs. Norajill Winstead who helps host a quarterly lunch at Auburn United Methodist Church for veterans. She invited me to a lunch on September 25th. I excitedly accepted the offer, and I started posting on my social media and contacting friends to recruit volunteers. I used the graphic designed below.



I ended up having three friends wanting to participate this semester. I met with them for coffee to go over some questions to understand more of their baseline knowledge of the military and elderly, intentions for volunteering through HHH, and expectations of the program. Through this, one of the volunteers decided she could not commit this semester. The other two volunteers attended the veterans' lunch with me. I was able to inform the attendees of the lunch about my program, and we sat at a table to relationally connect with veterans. I had several veterans give me their contact information to be connected with volunteers. I also realized I should pair two volunteers with each veteran. At this point, I knew I needed to recruit more volunteers, so I decided to send my digital flyer to Auburn's Turning Point USA chapter. About six more people were interested in volunteering, so I met with them for coffee. Through this, some decided to not commit to the program, so I ended up having five volunteers and myself in total to be paired with three veterans. The marketing and recruitment process required a lot of problem solving, but I learned how to make it more timely for future semesters.

Through the coffee chats, I learned where the volunteers were starting from before meeting with a veteran. I asked the following questions to each of them:

- 1) Do you have any veterans in your family? Have you heard their stories and military related life lessons?
- 2) Have you been around the elderly for an extended period of time?
- 3) Are you able to commit to meeting with the veteran at least four times before Christmas?
- 4) Why do you want to participate in this opportunity?

All of the volunteers had a grandfather or uncle that served that did not share many stories. So they were starting out with minimal military knowledge. One volunteer worked with the elderly over the summer, one volunteer always spent time with her grandparents and their friends, and the other volunteers only had a few experiences with the elderly. All volunteers verbally committed to meeting with the veteran four times before Christmas. One volunteer desired to do this to be "a companion and advocate," and this opportunity was an answered prayer to getting involved in an experience related to her future career goals. The other volunteers were interested in the wisdom, life lessons, and stories to be gained from befriending veterans.

I paired volunteers Lauren and Micah with veteran Jeff Davis, volunteers Emma and Josh with veteran Nick Conrad, and volunteers Sofia and myself with veteran Carey Owen. I reminded each group to schedule times to meet with their veterans. Mr. Jeff did not respond to emails or phone calls, so volunteers Lauren and Micah will be paired with a different veteran in the spring semester. Outside of the veterans' lunch, Emma and Josh met twice with Mr. Nick, and Sofia and I met three times with Mr. Carey. Emma told me several times that Mr. Nick was a captivating storyteller sharing tales for two to three hours like whale bodily noises heard on a submarine. His wife is suffering from dementia and lives separately in an assisted living facility, so I was thankful we were able to provide people he could talk to. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy having people invested in what he was saying. With Mr. Carey, we met for one to two hours each time and asked questions such as "what was a comfort item you carried with you?" and "did you have impactful relationships in the military?" We learned about Hamburger Hill and his time as a medic. He told us about how he deliberately chose to not make deep friendships to prevent facing unbearable grief from death. He told us stories about his time off in Australia. In our last meeting, Mr. Carey brought a binder of his military pictures shown below.



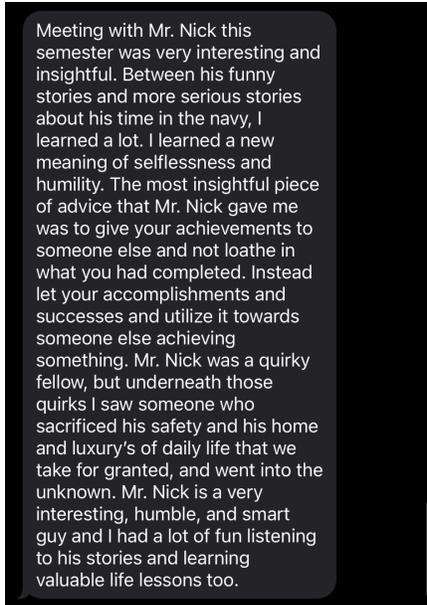
He told us how his family has not asked as many questions as we have about his experience. I noticed in Mr. Carey an increasing excitement and joy for him to pass along his stories. He deeply appreciated our interest. I am so thankful this experience not only positively benefitted him but the volunteers as well. Personally, I did not learn about the Vietnam War in school, so I learned a significant amount of history through his stories and perspective. Sofia gained knowledge and a deep respect for Mr. Carey. Emma and Josh learned to care for people who might be quietly struggling. Overall, I am happy with the impact this mentorship program has made this semester.

My original goals and measure of success included the following:

- 1) care for older veterans who are widowed, single, or living by themselves
- 2) connect 2 younger people each to a different veteran every fall and spring semester for two years
- 3) contact local assisted living or independent living facilities to find veterans that fit these criteria

- 4) pictures and short summaries from the times they meet up with their assigned veteran, and I will share this information as the measurable milestones
- 5) the success of this project will be allowing veterans to share their stories and giving younger people someone they can learn from as a mentorship opportunity

Overall these goals were met. We doubled the goal of connecting 2 younger people with a veteran for the first semester. I did have only one picture from a meeting, so I will be more intentional next semester to ask for pictures from each group. The most significant summary from a volunteer is included in the photo below:



Kicking off Helping a Heritage of Heroism this fall has grown a deep love in myself for mobilization. I have the opportunity to bring other people into things I am passionate about. This experience will hopefully impact Emma's career in her geriatric care career. The stories shared will change the way all of the volunteers respect veterans. I believe this program will spread by word-of-mouth to continue growing its reach. I am excited to recruit more veterans and volunteers in the spring semester to take part in caring for the older population and loving our country.