



Hellena Pugh Success Story – November 15, 2020

By Lorrie DeFrank

Hellena Pugh wishes the U.S. military prepared members for transition back to civilian life as well as it trains them when they enlist—especially women. To help fill that gap in Northeast Florida, she created Zahara Veterans Network Inc. with guidance from the Jacksonville Women’s Business Center. The nonprofit links women veterans from all branches in a five-county area with resources and services.

One of the fastest growing segments of veterans, women often face more challenges than their male counterparts, according to Pugh, founder and executive director. For example, some services are available only to veterans who have been in combat, which women had not received credit for doing until recent years.

A former second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps, Pugh chose Jacksonville as her nonprofit’s home base because Northeast Florida has about 20,000 women veterans, the largest population in the state and the second largest in the country. Of the country’s 1.8 million women veterans, more than 140,000 live in Florida. Like males, female veterans commit suicide at an alarming rate, she said. Zahara connects women veterans with such services as mental health support, resume writing, career development, finances, family support and cyber security, and puts them in touch with government programs. It has expanded its network by establishing relationships with women veterans nationwide.

Although the majority of women veterans are doing exceptionally well and many have exceeded at starting and operating their own businesses, a major concern is the large percentage who fail to get involved with the veteran community, Pugh said. “If women veterans had a vested interest in supporting the women veterans community, the unmet needs and challenges would be solved through our assistance, one to the other.”

Zahara has partnered with companies such as Amazon and Chick-fil-A to sponsor educational events for women veterans and has participated in the Southern Women’s Show in Jacksonville the past four years.

Pugh’s desire to create Zahara—meaning to illuminate—stemmed from her own frustration at securing services for injuries to her feet when she was in combat training in the Marines. After her four-year stint ended in 2012 she encountered other women veterans having bad experiences while she underwent physical therapy and rehabilitation. “We need to start an organization so we can share information with each other,” she thought at the time.

In 2015 she reached out to the Small Business Development Center at the University of North Florida to learn what she needed to do to get a nonprofit up and running. Area Director Kevin Monahan advised her to also take advantage of the many resources offered by JWBC. Since then, Pugh has completed several JWBC programs, including Mentor Connect, Peer Pitch, Financial Matters, Customer Development and Venture Leadership, with Marketing Matters up next.

“I’m a business major but working with the Women’s Business Center through the JAX Chamber really made me look at how to effectively operate my business,” said the Chicago State University graduate. “Learning from mentors who sit on boards of nonprofits was motivating and encouraging.”

Financial Matters exposed her to a business model canvas that identified her major supporters and donors and better defined her industry, she said. Switching from Excel spreadsheets to QuickBooks software significantly improved her accounting.

Customer Development, Venture Leadership and Peer Pitch all helped her develop a better qualifying statement that she found invaluable in engaging women who frequently don’t mention their veteran connections in conversations. Pugh was celebrated as a top finalist for the Professional Women’s Council 2020 Professional Minority Woman of the Year.

“Hellena has the drive to accomplish anything,” says Director, Jackie Geary. “She successfully completed the Entrepreneurial Certificate Program in one year which shows her determination to grow her business and provide support to the Veteran community. She constantly asked questions and helped mentor other entrepreneurs in each course she completed with the Jacksonville Women’s Business Center. I am very proud of her success and openness to learn and think in new innovative ways.”

Throughout her life, Pugh has benefitted from mentors and other influential people, mostly women. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago, she was encouraged by committed teachers. After college she put off her goal of joining the Marine’s officer program to gain corporate experience, becoming a purchasing coordinator for Walgreens, which she praised for its training, opportunities and support.

“Any woman establishing or growing a business, veteran or not, needs to be at the JWBC instead of bumping her head against the wall,” Pugh said. “They are organized to help women grow and maintain their businesses. Had I known about it sooner I would be 10 feet further down the road.”

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