

My father left when I was three leaving my mother to raise me alone. I was three when my father succumbed to alcoholism and left the family. Having lost a significant contributor to our income and living in an impoverished country with no social safety net programs for single-parent homes. My family often relied on friends and extended family for financial assistance, childcare, food, and other necessities. For years, my mother and sister worked long hours, often leaving me at home by myself or with extended family members who would come from the rural provinces to find employment in the city where we lived. My mother provided for them while they lived with us, instilling in me the value of giving back to my community and helping others whenever I can.

Because of all the hard work that my mother and sister did to provide for me, and all the support that we received from others so that my mother and sister could in fact, work hard to provide for me, I poured my heart out into my studies. In my home country, a good education is a privilege that families have to pay for, and my family ensured that I remain in school and do well. I found solace and enjoyment in my schoolwork and quickly gravitated towards the sciences, particularly biology. My love for science continued to develop and was nurtured when I enrolled at a science high school where I received a full scholarship. Because our education was funded by taxpayer money, students were encouraged all the time to use their education to give back to their country and improve the lives our countrymen, many of whom are impoverished. At the school's Christmas party during my senior year, the school invited children from the slum across the street to celebrate the holiday season with us. Each student was assigned to be a "big brother" or "big sister" to a child for an entire day. My "little sister" was 6 years old, and when I asked her what she wanted for Christmas—I was hoping, a toy, because that's what I had waiting in the back of the bench on which we were sitting—her response was for her father to heal from pneumonia so he could work again, and a bus so he wouldn't have to work too hard at the pier.

Prior to meeting my "little sister," I have always known and appreciated the value of community and how its many members work together to bring about a common goal. Through my interaction with her, I became cognizant of the "invisible" players in larger community to which I also belong. The workers in the pier who ensure that goods are transported and distributed properly, and the bus drivers who take me from one place to another. To some, they are parents and breadwinners; to some, friends and confidantes. As a senior in high school, I was at a point in my life where everyone asked me what I wanted to study in college, what I wanted to do with my life.

A few months later, my father reached out to me and informed me that he has since immigrated to the United States, remarried, and recovered from alcoholism. He apologized for having left a huge void in my life and for the difficulties that his absence has caused. He asked if I would be interested in joining him in America and spoke of the various opportunities that are available to people there, regardless of their origins, age, or gender. As a 16-year-old immigrant who had always relied on others for support, I longed for a community, but also feared poverty. Hoping to achieve financial stability and join a community, I enlisted early in the United States Navy Reserves.

Once I completed my required Naval training, I became a reservist free to pursue a college education, unless called to active duty, which actually happened immediately following the winter term of my sophomore year. I was deployed to wartime Afghanistan.

Ten months after my enlistment and after finishing my required Naval training, I started my undergraduate studies. A year and a half later, just after my sophomore year, my Navy Reserve group

was called up to deploy to wartime Afghanistan. When I returned from deployment, the transition seemed easy at first but I did not realize how severe the impact of being deployed to a combat zone was on me. It took nearly a year for the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder to become fully apparent. I ignored the signs—increasing anger, despondency, irritability, lethargy, inability to sleep, and feelings of worthlessness—and dismissed them as character flaws and a normal part of the college experience until I started to have debilitating panic attacks that interrupted my life at inconvenient times. I did not realize how significantly stress and anxiety could make my heart beat so hard and so fast; making breathing, digesting, sleeping, and studying difficult; and even making my friends and my own body feel foreign to me. To complicate matters, having been brought up in a community where survival was first and foremost, the only thing I knew to do was to keep going, keep working - even though my life was falling apart around me and my grades were suffering with me. With the encouragement and support of my friends, I eventually sought professional counseling and slowly with help and therapy I began to get my life back. I was diagnosed with PTSD. It took months before I found the right provider for me and before I was properly diagnosed with anxiety and PTSD. It was not until then that I began receiving counseling to combat and face down the illness that I had been unknowingly struggling with. I learned to prioritize my health and seek out the care I needed. I learned and experienced the challenges of coping, dealing with, and healing from this mental, emotional, and moral injury, and experienced firsthand the impact of my invisible wounds on my life: my relationships were challenged, my health was impacted, and my grades and work suffered. Months of cognitive behavioral therapy and regular conversations and interactions with supportive friends and family eventually resulted in my recovery. An ultimate lesson that I've taken away from all of this is that without my health and my life, I have nothing. I was reminded of the value of life and health, and when I combine that with my value for community ... as well as my community's important role in my recovery.

The bonds of veterans are strong. We have war stories and experiences shared that no one else can truly understand and relate to, so this shared experience give us a common bond and as a result we find we gravitate toward each other and the comradery that comes from shared experiences.

Having experienced what many service members have experienced, I felt a stronger connection with other veterans, many of whom have experienced far worse than I have. For this reason, I decided to volunteer at my local VA hospital, with the No Veteran Dies Alone program, where I provide assistance, companionship, and a comforting presence to veterans who are suffering from advanced or terminal illness when their friends and families are unavailable to sit bedside. While I was fortunate to have recovered from my illness, survival and healing now elude the veterans I help care for, and helping them achieve well-being and the best quality of life possible becomes the priority. To many veterans, it means being free from pain and being able to rest peacefully. Sometimes, however, a veteran, like John, would go from sleeping peacefully on his bed at the VA hospital, to fighting in Vietnam, to asking me if he is going to get dialysis, back to fighting in Vietnam, and then begging me to take his pain away and holding my hand as we waited for the doctor to come. He was frail and thin from years of alcohol and drug abuse, as well as months of chemotherapy, and his nurse said that the doctors were cautious about giving him too much pain medication as it may cause his blood pressure to drop drastically. But we learned that night that John wasn't getting too much pain medication; he wasn't getting enough. I felt distressed at witnessing his suffering and helpless for not being able to take it away. I stood vigil by John's bedside, held his hand, and regularly checked for changes in his expression or breathing. I comforted him, soothed his chapped lips by applying Vaseline when he couldn't, responded to each cry

for help by calling in the nurse, who then called the doctor. For his suffering, I wanted to be more helpful. It was the doctor's decision to make the necessary call for increasing the pain medication that significantly reduced his suffering. It was the doctor's skills and expertise, that I didn't have but wanted, that granted him peace and brought him to a state of well-being. My experiences, especially as a veteran struggling with PTSD have instilled me in the value of health, well-being, community, and life. Without health and well-being, a person is unable to do the things that are important to them.