*Orange County Navy League - General Prize Essay Contest*

*Struggles to a therapist didn't make me feel weak; it allowed me to reconnect with my humanity and understand that resilience includes knowing when to ask for support.*

*Transitioning from military service to civilian life was not without its difficulties. Adjusting to a world where the structures and support systems I had relied upon were no longer present was daunting. I faced moments of uncertainty and self-doubt, but these challenges ultimately became opportunities for growth. One of the most significant obstacles I faced was navigating the complexity of pursuing higher education after military service. I joined the military because I never thought that I would be smart enough to attend college. Once I gained the courage to start my academic career, I took off and never looked back. My decision to pursue a degree in social work is a natural extension of my experiences in the military as I recognized the need for holistic care that encompasses mental health, social reintegration, and long-term support for our veterans.*

*I am currently focusing on trauma-informed care and veteran advocacy in my studies as I am interning at the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital in Long Beach, CA. My goal is to develop programs that address the intersectionality of veterans' physical, emotional, and social challenges. I am particularly passionate about ensuring veterans access to comprehensive care, including mental health resources and support for reintegration. Additionally, my own struggles with reintegration deepened my understanding of the barriers that veterans face. Perhaps most importantly, my experiences have reinforced the belief that meaningful change begins with compassion and understanding. As a social worker, I will bring these values to every interaction, ensuring veterans feel seen, heard, and supported.*

*My military background, coupled with my experiences in the medical field and academic pursuits, have prepared me to face challenges head-on and remain steadfast in my commitment.*

*My military background has profoundly affected me by paving the way for my current academic pursuits and future aspirations as a social worker. Serving in the military taught me resilience, adaptability, and the importance of community. My service, combined with my life experiences and obstacles after separating from the military, has cultivated a deep sense of purpose to support veterans in navigating their struggles, particularly in the areas of mental health and reintegration into civilian life.*

*While in the military, I witnessed firsthand the immense challenges service members face. From combat stress to physical injuries, these experiences often left scars, both visible and invisible. In my role as a dental assistant with a specialty in oral maxillofacial surgery and dental forensics, I have had the privilege of working with service members who were navigating the long road to recovery after life-altering combat injuries. Through my work, I have seen the profound impact of compassionate care and a supportive environment on a veteran's outlook and recovery. In the field of forensics, I have also observed the devastating effects of untreated mental health issues. Witnessing the tragic aftermath of military suicides in my forensic work brought the reality of this crisis into focus, igniting my passion to make a difference and address the crisis of veteran suicide.*

*While vital for its mission, the culture of resilience and self-reliance that defines the military often creates an environment where admitting personal struggles feels like a betrayal of that identity. Struggling to address my own mental health challenges while serving in the military was one of the most challenging and transformative experiences of my life. For years, I internalized the typical mindset that I should be afraid to acknowledge my mental health issues as they might jeopardize my career, alienate my peers, or label me as weak. Admitting to helping veterans. Reflecting on my own journey, I recognize the courage it took to confront my struggles and the growth that came from seeking help. The lessons I have learned, from resilience in the face of adversity to the power of community, will continue to guide me as I work toward a future where every veteran has the resources and support, they need to thrive. Through service, education, and unwavering dedication, I am determined to make a lasting impact in the lives of those who have served our nation.*