

By Jamie York

I spoke with former U.S. Army nurse Donna Brown, 66, at the Chillicothe (Ohio) VAMC, which was one of the hospitals slated for closure under the now-disbanded AIR Commission.

Tell me about your service, Donna.

I am a veteran of the Army Nurse Corps. I started out in the enlisted reserves as a medical laboratory technician then went to nursing school, got my nursing degree, and went on active duty as a commissioned Army nurse. I served from 1985 to 1992. I went in during peace time and came out during wartime because nobody expected that Saddam Hussein would invade Kuwait. I was supposed to be deployed three times and I became the absolute joke of my unit because three times I was told I was leaving for the Gulf and three times they kept changing my orders and then the war ended. I even got a going-away party by my friends and I never left the United States. Instead, they sent me to a small, 8-bed Army field hospital in the middle of Honduras. That was an incredible experience and I think the highlight of my time in the military, besides being patriotic and loving to serve my country during wartime. I was the officer in charge of our humanitarian outreach in Central America and we got to go to an orphanage every week and a group of us soldiers got to love on the children, improve the condition of their lives, and fix up the orphanage. At Christmastime we had an angel tree so the children could have a wonderful Christmas and I honestly think that all of the soldiers were more blessed than even the children were.

When did you start going to the VA?

When I first got out of the military I came from overseas and out-processed and I really didn't understand I was even a veteran because I thought you had to be a man wounded in combat to be a veteran. Other than using the VA for my 90-day eligibility period when I got out, I didn't learn until 17 years later, after watching a television commercial about applying for a veteran's home loan and visiting a veteran's center in my community, that I was eligible for healthcare. I got off active duty in 1992 and 2009 was the first time I went to the VA.

What is your overall impression of healthcare at the VA?

Being a medical person, I'm a little bit partial to military and VA healthcare. I know we hear a lot of negativism but I absolutely love the care that I get at the Chillicothe VA Medical Center. I've been to five different VAs in four different states and I've been treated with dignity and respect and received good care.

Do you think you get the same level of care in the private sector?

I have been outsourced to the community and I received good care, but quite honestly I like the VA because I think there's an understanding of veterans and what they've been through because of their military service. There's a camaraderie, so yes, I have had good community care, but I have a preference for VA medical care.

Male veterans far outnumber female veterans, so how has your VA care been as a female veteran?

First let me say that my husband didn't like to come with me to the VA because they always thought he was the veteran. I actually have been treated quite well as a female veteran. I don't mind being in the minority and I've been treated, by and large, with great respect.

Would you recommend the VA to other female veterans, and if so what advice would you give them?

Absolutely, I would highly recommend it to female veterans. The advice I would give would be to overcome any preconceived notions of what VA care is. I mentioned before that there has been a lot of negative press and I think sometimes negative news gets more attention than good news. The culture of the VA is slowly changing and many women serve in the armed forces and they deserve the same benefits and respect as their male counterparts.