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**Commander Caroline Merillat**

### **As told to Shaun Ryan**

#### **Can you tell us about the Palm Valley American Legion and what it does?**

I think that to understand who we are locally, you must first understand the highest purpose of the American Legion.

The American Legion is one of only a few (48) Veteran Service Organizations that is chartered by Congress. The mission of the American Legion is "to enhance the well-being of America's veterans, their families, our military and our communities by our devotion to mutual helpfulness." The American Legion's vision statement is "The American Legion: Veterans Strengthening America."

The Palm Valley American Legion Post 233 is a local post that was chartered in 1971. As a local post, we support the overall mission of the American Legion through local activities. We at post 233 have gotten pretty involved in our community lately. We partner with local charities to raise funds for their cause, we offer monthly comedy to the community to help with the stress of the current state of the world, we offer a venue for the community as well as friends and families of the post to host their special events and our proceeds from all of the events as well as our daily operations support the various different charities and Legion programs that we subscribe to.

**Are there some aspects of the American Legion that the public may not be aware of or may misunderstand?**

There are certainly some misconceptions about the American Legion, and to be honest, until eight years ago, I was under those same misconceptions.

The biggest misconception to address would be that the American Legion is an old bar where old guys sit around and talk about stuff; sometimes the image is a dark smokey place. While some American Legion Posts such as mine here, do have a bar, that is not who we are. The lounge, club, bar area was created in posts many years ago in order to provide a safe and comfortable place for our veterans to fellowship with others who shared experiences. We still like to offer that, but the needs of the younger generations have changed, and we are fortunate to have members that recognize that are working to engage more with the younger vets in the community while still including those vets who have been members through it all.

Another misconception is that you must be a veteran to belong. We have memberships for Sons of The American Legion (SAL) and American Legion Auxiliary (ALA) for those that are sons, grandsons, daughters, granddaughters and spouses who believe in the mission and want to support it.

The truth of what we really are, is an organization, a family, that is dedicated to supporting veterans, families and community as the mission states. We do this in many ways; by providing a venue for helping the community grow and support local charities, financial support to the various programs, and volunteers to support the various needs in our community.

I'd like to add here that becoming a member, even if you don't like to "go to the bar" or "don't drink" helps keep our membership strong, which gives the American Legion the power of numbers when they lobby for change, so please consider joining so you can make a difference!

**What are some of the challenges that veterans face today? Are there ways the American Legion is helping to address these challenges?**

There are many challenges facing veterans today, and the American Legion does lobby to bridge many of those gaps. The biggest one, I would say, is health care for our veterans, including disabilities and working through VA claims. The American Legion is involved in finding different solutions for the different issues; it is an issue that the American Legion has been dedicated to since the original charter in 1919 in one way or another.

**How long have you been the commander at the post?**

I have just been elected for the fourth year/term. I am the first female commander that the post has had, and I might be the youngest as well. Most of my Past Commanders were retired at the time they took command; I still have a career, a day job I go to in addition to this commitment.

**Tell us about your background, such as your education, military experience and career.**

I grew up in a small town in Ohio and was anxious to get out and see the world, so I joined the Army. I was in the Army, from 1992 to 1997. I was an airborne preventative medicine technician, stationed in Camp Zama, Japan, and Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, during my time on active duty.

I decided to separate from the Army and focus on family, raising my three children, and I served as an Army wife for a few years in Ft. Knox, Kentucky, West Point, New York, and ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

I finished my bachelor of science degree in psychology at Eastern Michigan University (by using the G.I. Bill, another program that was initiated and pushed by the American Legion).

I have an eclectic resume, from volunteering to working with adjudicated teenaged boys to my current career in clinical research. I currently work at Mayo Clinic in clinical research, but I have to

say that my real passion is making a difference in the community and with our veterans. It was about seven years ago when I first got connected to the American Legion. I was looking for a side hustle as a bartender, and I had no experience, but American Legion Post 147 in Northville, Michigan, took a chance on me and I spent two-to-three evenings a week there getting to know more about what the Legion is.

When I moved to Ponte Vedra, I immediately applied to a job at Palm Valley Post 233 and was hired within a few weeks. I gradually learned more and more about what a powerful and valuable organization the Legion is. I got more involved, and the rest is history!

**What do you like best about living in the Ponte Vedra area?**

I moved to Florida six years ago to be in warmer weather and be near the beach. I lived in PV for the first year, and then I lived across the ditch for three years. I missed PV and just had to move back!

To pick my favorite thing about PV is hard but to give it a try, I would say I just love the way it feels. It's fun, yet relaxing, old, yet new. I love that wherever I go, I run into someone I know and many new faces ... familiar, yet new. And the friends I have met in my time here are some of the greatest!

**In your spare time, do you have some hobbies or activities that you enjoy?**

My spare time ... I don't remember what that is! The best thing in the world to do in any free time that I have is spend it with my family and friends. I am very limited on my time, and I appreciate all the times I can spend it with all those I care about.

I also love working out with my class at Crossfit JaxBeach, fitness and friends at the same time! If I need a little time to myself, that would be at the beach, reflecting and re-energizing. If I get a few days off, I really love going to visit my son, daughter-in-law and especially my grandson.

I am also starting a local podcast to highlight local nonprofits that are dedicated to changing the world we live in for the better!