



## SERVED LIKE A GIRL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES GUIDE

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## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

I had been running a non-profit for ten years and was interested in getting back into producing, not directing. When I first learned of the Ms. Veteran America competition, I thought it would make a great documentary. When I dug deeper, and learned about the issues female veterans face when returning home from deployment, I was shocked; and when I learned about the staggering and unacceptable statistics of homeless female veterans in this country, I was angered and embarrassed.

Since the competition was looming, I had to start filming while actively looking for a director. I met with some amazing, award-winning directors, but would always find a problem with them. Then I realized my issues had nothing to do with the directors—I had already fallen in love with the girls and their stories, and I could not let it go.

As we began filming, my original outline completely fell apart. I quickly realized this wasn't a competition film, the documentary was about these sheroes, and their stories. In the end, it didn't matter who won the competition. It became about the journey.

I had always intended for *Served Like A Girl* to reach a wide audience and have the feel of a narrative with a traditional three act structure. I purposely didn't have an opinion, and it was never my intention to attack anyone. I wanted to let the story unfold naturally and simply be a butterfly on the wall. (I don't like flies).

Additionally, humor was very important to me. I was constantly thinking about my audience and didn't want them to watch the film and feel despair—like they needed to jump off a tall building. I feel we have accomplished that with *Served Like A Girl*. My hope was for audiences to enjoy the film while learning about the issues women veterans face and then be moved to take action. Call it: accidental learning.

– Lysa Heslov, Director, *Served Like A Girl*



## FILM SYNOPSIS

*Served Like a Girl* provides a candid look at a shared sisterhood to help the rising number of homeless women veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and suffer from PTSD, sexual abuse, and other traumas. By entering into the “Ms. Veteran America” competition, these amazing ladies unexpectedly come full circle in a quest for healing and hope.

## SCREENING CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

*Served Like a Girl* upends traditional ideas of what it means to be a soldier. Your screenings of the film offer an opportunity for your community to discuss a range of topics related to gender in the military. The stories of the women veterans interviewed reveal a need to acknowledge their service and ensure equal access to transitional services for all members of the military. By screening the film and organizing a post-screening discussion or activity, your Indie Lens Pop-Up events can help to meet these goals of the *Served Like a Girl* engagement campaign:

- Build greater awareness around diverse women veteran experiences (including homelessness, military sexual trauma (MST), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the impact on children and family, and connect the audience to local resources that support veterans and their families.
- Bridge the military/civilian divide and find ways that the audience can learn more, get involved, and/or further the conversation.
- Recognize women veterans as strong leaders and mentors, who can inspire and empower girls and young women to challenge traditional gender roles.

## RELEVANT TOPICS AND ISSUES

- Veterans
- Gender
- Military culture
- Homelessness
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Military Sexual Trauma (MST)
- Leadership
- Art and expression
- Women in filmmaking



## POTENTIAL AUDIENCES

- Women and young women
- Veterans and active service members
- Family members of veterans and active service members
- Student ROTC and veteran groups
- Advocates working in mental health, homelessness, and/or sexual assault
- Social service and veteran service providers, including:
  - Medical / health providers
  - Mental health or substance abuse counselors
  - Social Workers
  - Sexual Trauma Treatment and Support Groups
- Pageant supporters and participants
- Supporters of the arts and humanities
- Women in filmmaking organizations

## PEOPLE PROFILED

Sergeant Nichole Alred (Army) - Nichole served 6 years in the Army as a mechanic, including one tour in Kuwait and two in Iraq. Nichole joined the Army as a single mother in an effort to give her son a better life. She and her mother share a very special relationship, with her mother being her biggest supporter throughout her service and through the Ms. Veteran America competition. The filmmakers are still working with Nichole to produce a six-part docu-series about solving the murder of her father.

Major Jaspen Boothe (Army) - Jas is a Chicago native, disabled veteran, cancer survivor, and international speaker who served 17 years in the Army. She founded Final Salute in 2010 and the Ms. Veteran America competition in 2012, which have collectively raised over \$2 million and assisted over 3,600 women veterans and children in over 30 states and territories. Jas continues to advocate for women veterans at risk of homelessness, and at the time this guide was written, is gearing up for the next Ms. Veteran America preliminary competition in Las Vegas, May 2018.

Lieutenant Commander Rachel Engler (Navy) - Rachel is second-generation Navy on both her mother and father's side. A former NFL cheerleader and a registered nurse, she received her officer's commission straight out of college and deployed to Afghanistan. In 2011, she was diagnosed with a chronic neuromuscular illness called Myasthenia Gravis - a condition which still affects her life today, but which hasn't slowed her volunteer work on behalf of her fellow veterans. Since filming, Rachel has started Hoofprints for HEROes, an equine therapy camp for women veterans.

Master at Arms First Class Hope Garcia (Navy) - Hope is a survivor. She served 10 years in the Navy before being placed on the Permanent Disability Retired list. She struggles with PTSD, as well as with the trauma resulting from two sexual assaults she suffered during her service. The trauma Hope has endured hasn't stopped her from fighting to better her life for not only her, but her sons. At the time of filming, Hope was working her way through school while attempting to build a career as a pin-up model. Since filming, Hope has found an apartment where she lives with her children. Hope's mother, Cindy, who was reunited with her in the film, has unfortunately passed away due to a domestic violence incident.



Master Sergeant Denyse Gordon (Air Force) - Denyse comes from a long and proud history of military and civic service. She herself is an OEF/OIF combat veteran and a 22 1/2 Year United States Air Force Reserves Master Sergeant having served 12 years on active duty. In 2012, she was crowned the first Ms. Veteran America and continues with the competition as its director.

Specialist Marissa Strock (Army) - Marissa lost both lower legs in 2005, when an IED detonated beneath her Army Humvee outside Baghdad and killed three of the five people on board. After competing in Ms. Veteran America 2013 and taking home three trophies, including one for significant military achievement, this self-proclaimed “glamputee” has served as the event’s Master of Ceremonies in subsequent years. Since filming, Marissa has enrolled as a full-time student.

Sergeant Andrea Waterbury (Army) - Andrea enlisted in the Army two days after 9/11 and was deployed in Iraq for two years starting in 2003. A dynamic small-town woman and divorced mother of four, she works as the Cavalier Cadet Corp instructor at Chillicothe High School and she continues to serve proudly in the Army Reserves. Since filming, Andrea has been pursuing a new career as a medical death investigator.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Women account for approximately two million of the 20 million veterans in the U.S. (VA, 2017). They represent the fastest growing segment of the veteran community.

Women have always been involved in the U.S. military in some capacity, but they have not always been considered veterans. Before physical exams were required to enlist, women disguised themselves as men to join the military. Formally, they were first allowed to enlist in 1901 in the Army Nurse Corps, but they did not receive full pay or rank. (ibid.)

As wartime needs expanded throughout the 20th Century, other support roles, such as telephone operators or interpreters, opened up for service women in order to free men up for combat. After World War II, an act by Congress made women a permanent part of military service, but it wasn’t until well after World War II that service women were officially recognized as veterans of war. (ibid.)

In the 1990s, more combat roles were opened to women, including flying combat planes and serving on combat ships. However, the Pentagon largely limited women’s mobility within combat roles, as stated in the “combat exclusion policy”:

“Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground.”  
(Patterson, 2016)

The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars after 2001 saw the greatest number of active service women. While still officially limited to non-combat roles at the time, women served alongside combat units in warzones exposing them to just as much danger as other service members. In 2013, the U.S. military changed their policy and opened up more than 250,000 previously closed positions to women in the military. (SWAN, 2017) Since then, branches have been training and



preparing women for application to new roles, including elite fighting forces like the Navy SEALs and Army Rangers.

As the expansion of women's roles in the military has been slow, so has the expansion of services for women veterans. Many services identified by the VA are in need of improvement: basic female healthcare at VA hospitals (such as gynecological care); decreasing barriers to access health services (such as distance to a VA center or lack of childcare); and making sure women veterans know that services are available for them. (VA, 2017)

Upon returning home, veterans transitioning back to civilian life experience a range of responses. PTSD is a response to experiencing a traumatic or life-threatening event, such as war. Symptoms of PTSD can include depression, anxiety, insomnia, isolating oneself, irritability, or substance abuse—and they can linger for years. Up to 20 percent of all veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars experience PTSD. Closely related to PTSD is MST: military sexual trauma. MST can occur after a service member experiences sexual assault or sustained sexual harassment during their military service. The full scope of MST is difficult to track because, due to a history of mishandled cases, incidents go widely unreported to authorities. The VA has revealed that about 25 percent of women veterans seeking services have indicated that they experienced sexual assault while in the military, and more than half reported that they experienced sexual harassment. (VA, 2018)

Because mental illness is three to four times more prevalent with those experiencing homelessness, it is seen as a contributing factor of housing instability. (NCHV, 2018) Veterans who struggle with PTSD or MST are at higher risk of homelessness. Other factors may include difficulty finding employment after military service or disrupted personal support networks as a result of serving. Veteran women are more than twice as likely as non-Veteran women to experience homelessness. (VA, 2016)

#### Sources:

- National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), Homeless Female Veterans. 2018. <http://www.nchv.org/images/uploads/HFV%20paper.pdf>
- Patterson, Thom. "Get ready for more US women in combat." CNN, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/10/us/women-combat-us-military/index.html>
- Service Women Action Network (SWAN), "Women in Ground Combat: Facts and Figures." 2017. <http://bit.ly/2vbfQAE>
- VA, "Women Veterans Report." 2017. [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Women\\_Veterans\\_2015\\_Final.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Women_Veterans_2015_Final.pdf)
- VA, "Women Veterans and Homelessness." 2016. <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/nchav/docs/HERS-Womens-Proceedings.pdf>
- VA, "PTSD: National Center for PTSD." 2018. <http://bit.ly/2HvMRKh>



## FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Creating a space for veterans to share their stories can be a very empowering experience. However, not all veterans you invite may be ready to speak publicly about their experiences in the military. Make sure to give veterans and participants in your event plenty of up-front information about the themes and questions you would like to discuss at your event.

Work with your moderator to create a safe space at your event for participants to share stories about service. Remind your audience members to listen respectfully and speak from the first person when sharing an opinion or perspective. Even if your audience members disagree with U.S. foreign policy, it is important that we as communities show respect to veterans who have returned home after the difficulties of war.

Some of the stories or topics in the film related to combat or sexual assault may bring up strong emotions for veterans or viewers in your audience. Consider designating a quiet, private space at your venue for people to go if they need a moment to process their response to the film. Make sure to point out the space in your event introduction so people know where to go for privacy.

These helplines can also be distributed at your event for veterans that may need support:

- Women Veterans Call Center: call 1-855-VA-WOMEN or visit <https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/ProgramOverview/wvcc.asp>
- Veteran Crisis Line: call 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, text 838255, or visit <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>
- Veterans that are homeless or at risk of homelessness: call 1-877- 4AID-VET or visit <http://www.va.gov/womenvet/>
- RAINN's National Sexual Assault Hotline: call 1-800-656-4673 or visit <https://hotline.rainn.org>

## CONVERSATION STARTER

Your *Served Like a Girl* DVD/Blu-ray screeners features the following conversation starter on the menu screen before the film starts:

### **Share a story about a veteran you know.**

Project the conversation starter before the film begins as guests are taking their seat at your venue. Prior to the film or your panel discussion, encourage participants to turn to a person sitting near them to share their answers for two to three minutes, including any recent examples that come to mind. If time permits, invite a few people to share with the entire group.



## POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

Invite speakers from one or several of these suggested categories below to discuss the themes in the film with your audience. If your speaker is affiliated with an organization or has a following in your community, ask them to invite their supporters to your event to participate in the discussion and make sure to provide all the necessary materials to help them promote.

- Amplify the voices of local **women veterans**. Invite them to share as much as they are willing about their experiences serving in our armed forces and returning to civilian life afterward. See if you can find veterans in your area who can relate to the experiences of those in the film. Their stories will help localize the issues and generate discussions on what your community might do to better support women veterans. Some groups to check out include:
  - Reach out to your state VA office: <https://www.va.gov/statedva.htm>
  - Search the directory of Veteran Service Organizations: <https://www.va.gov/vso/>
  - Contact the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) to see if there is a speaker in your area: <https://www.servicewomen.org/contact/>
  - Sign up as a service member or civilian supporter on RallyPoint, an online professional network for military service people: <https://www.rallypoint.com/>
  - Contact the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) to see if there is a speaker in your area: <https://iava.org/contact/> or look for an IAVA VetTogether event near you: <http://iava.org/vettogether/>
- Invite **service providers** to talk about resources available for women veterans and what can be done to expand support. Look for local service providers focusing on issues mentioned in the film, such as people experiencing homelessness, PTSD, sexual assault, or wounded veterans. Consider adding suicide prevention services as well.
  - Find a local organization in the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans network: [http://www.nchv.org/index.php/help/help/locate\\_organization/](http://www.nchv.org/index.php/help/help/locate_organization/)
  - Search the RAINN database for a sexual assault service provider near you: <https://centers.rainn.org/>
  - Use the PTSD program locator from the VA: <https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp>
- Bring in organizations that work with **family members of veterans** to talk about the best ways to support loved ones going through transition from military service. Contact the National Military Family Association to see if there is a speaker near you: <http://www.militaryfamily.org/about-us/contact.html>.
- Incorporate **women's organizations** to discuss the experiences of women in leadership roles across sectors. Locate YWCA near you: <http://bit.ly/2qp7y2y> or find a local branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW): [https://ww2.aauw.org/branch\\_locator/index.php](https://ww2.aauw.org/branch_locator/index.php).





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Arrange a moderator to facilitate a discussion with your panel of speakers or with your audience members. These questions could be adapted for either type of discussion. It's a good idea to review questions with your moderator and speakers before the event and select discussion topics accordingly.

- Describe your relationship to the armed services. If you have served, tell us when and where.
- What was your initial response to watching the film? Was it surprising to see soldiers participating in a pageant?
- Could you relate to the stories shared by the women veterans in the film? Do you think they are representative of what women veterans experience during and after military service?
- Are there other stories or experiences not represented in the film that you think are common to women veterans or the veteran community as a whole?
- Do you think a veteran's experience with transitioning back to civilian life varies greatly because of gender? Why or why not?
- In the film, Hope describes how she feels that her absence during her service affected her relationship with her sons. Do you think mothers in the military experience deployment differently than fathers? Why or why not?
- Many of the women in the film expressed the feeling of having to suppress their femininity during their military service. Do you think the standards for hair, nails, and grooming should be changed as more women enter the military? Why or why not?
- Jas describes how she was turned away from the VA because they didn't have any services for women. Can you help us better understand why veteran services can be harder to access for many women veterans who are transitioning out of the military? Has the situation improved since Jas's experience?
- In 2013, the U.S. officially lifted the ban on women serving in military combat roles. But as Marissa in the film reminds us, women have been serving in combat zones for years. What, if anything, has changed over the last five years as the military has worked to integrate women fully into the armed services?
- Women veterans are twice as likely to experience homelessness as non-veteran women. What are some of the factors that make housing unstable for women veterans in particular—and all veterans in general?
- Several of the women veterans in the film describe experiencing MST—Military Sexual Trauma. Can you help us understand what MST is and why it is so rampant in the military?



- Do you think services and understanding for veteran PTSD have improved in the last decade? If so, have they improved at an equal pace for veterans of all genders in the military? Why or why not?
- What are the services here locally that you would recommend to veterans, particularly women veterans, and their families? Are there veteran services that you would like to see more of in our community or in our country?
- For those in the audience that are not veterans, what can members of the larger community do to better support the veteran community?

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES BEYOND A PANEL

- Organize a **resource fair** to help connect veterans, their families, and the community to local information, materials, and volunteer opportunities. Use the organizations listed above in the Potential Partners and/or Speakers section for recommendations on who to include in your resource fair.
- Feature the **film's soundtrack** at your event by playing it as guests arrive and depart or during a reception. You could also consider giving a copy of the album and/or DVD away at random to a guest that signs up for your email list. Learn more about how to purchase a copy of the album featuring the film's soundtrack and the home DVD at the filmmaker's website: <http://servedlikeagirl.com/shop/uq5bjbs4h447dz5w3f2b6oqfwj6q6b>.
- Host a **ceremony** around Mother's Day or Memorial Day to honor women veterans and their families. Consider inviting an honor guard or color guard to perform at your event. Contact a nearby army base: <https://www.goarmy.com/about/post-locations.html>, or a local American Legion post: <http://www.members.legion.org> to see if they have an honor guard or color guard available for your event.
- Invite local veterans to participate in an **art exhibit or performance**. Look through the Colleagues section on the United States Veterans' Artists Alliance website for artists near you: <http://usvaa.org/>, or contact the Arts in the Armed Forces for recommendations: <https://aitaf.org/>. You can also check out the Veteran Artists Program through the VA: <https://www.va.gov/womenvet/acvv/artExhibit2017.asp> and <http://2017.veteranartistprogram.org/>.
- Screen the film **at a nearby base** for service people and their families. Invite service providers from the base to discuss efforts to end military sexual assault or things to consider when transitioning out of the military. Note that security can be strict on bases and you will need time to make the proper arrangements for your staff or others to attend.
- Ask veterans at your screening to **record an oral history** in the Military Voices Initiative through StoryCorps. Find a StoryCorps booth near you: <https://storycorps.org/discover/military-voices/> or use the app to have audience members record their own interviews: <https://storycorps.org/participate/storycorps-app/>



- Partner with a veteran organization to lead a **community service project**. For example, the Center for Women Veterans at the VA organizes a Nationwide Baby Shower to collect baby products for women veterans that are expecting: <https://www.va.gov/womenvet/acwv/babyShower.asp>. You could also look to organizations like Team Rubicon: <https://teamrubiconusa.org/>, or the Mission Continues: <https://missioncontinues.org/> for inspiration.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the resources listed throughout this guide, these websites provide additional information that may be helpful in preparing for your screenings of *Served Like a Girl*.

<http://pbs.org/servedlikeagirl> - The companion site created by *Independent Lens* for *Served Like a Girl*.

<http://servedlikeagirl.com/> - The filmmaker's website for the film *Served Like a Girl*.

<http://veteranscominghome.org/> - Veterans Coming Home is a public media initiative led by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to bridge the military-civilian divide in our communities.

<http://www.pbs.org/veterans/stories-of-service/home/> - PBS Stories of Service is a collection of public media programs and resources designed to raise awareness about veteran experiences.

<https://www.va.gov/womenvet/acwv/summitNational2017.asp> - The VA's Center for Women Veterans.

<https://www.va.gov/homeless/hud-vash.asp> - VA resources on the issue of homeless veterans.

<https://www.gotyour6.org/impacts/shesbadass/> - The #ShesBadass campaign from Got Your 6 promotes awareness about women in the military.

<https://iava.org/> - Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), which advocates for services for women veterans among other priorities.

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/military-sexual-trauma> - Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) is an American, non-profit anti-sexual assault organization.



## CREDITS

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**ITVS** is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. For more information, visit [itvs.org](http://itvs.org).

**INDEPENDENT LENS** is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit [pbs.org/independentlens](http://pbs.org/independentlens). Join the conversation: [facebook.com/independentlens](https://facebook.com/independentlens) and on Twitter @IndependentLens.