

Navy Veteran Conducts Pharmacy Research Project To Benefit Illinois Veterans

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EDWARDSVILLE – U.S. Navy veteran and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville pharmacy student Daniella Mazzaro is grateful for the healthcare coverage she receives through the Veterans Administration (VA). It's coverage she assumed all veterans received, until she learned during her School of Pharmacy (SOP) clinical rotation that less than half of all U.S. veterans have VA healthcare.

Lack of healthcare coverage is something Mazzaro, a native of Venezuela, understands all too well.

She recalls witnessing the country's transformation from the richest country in South America to a dangerous and unstable socialist country. Her mother, an Illinois resident, eventually attained a green card for Mazzaro, bringing her to live in the U.S. at age 16.

"I started public high school the day after moving here," Mazzaro said. "It was a big culture shock, but I was lucky to be here. I carried a dictionary everywhere I went, and eventually speaking English became second nature."

After graduating high school, Mazzaro was able to attain scholarships to earn an associate's at a community college. However, she was on her own, homeless, and without health insurance.

During college, Mazzaro saw a U.S. soldier for the first time. She was mesmerized. She went directly to a Navy recruiter's office upon graduating, where the recruiter encouraged her to ask questions and be sure of her commitment.

"When I was young, I wondered if the U.S. would ever come help us get our democracy back," Mazzaro said. "America is known to protect and fight for democracy, and I realized then that I could do the same. I know how fragile democracy truly is."

In boot camp, while other recruits had doubts about their choice to join, Mazzaro never wavered.

"I was relieved to have food and a place to sleep while having a purpose," she said.

While researching career options during her five-year contract with the Navy, Mazzaro found pharmacy to be an ideal match for her interests in healthcare and science. She received an acceptance letter to SIUE on her last day with the Navy, drove to Illinois, and began pursuing the next chapter in her education journey.

"Even though I still couldn't afford to have insurance as a college student, I had the opportunity to apply to VA healthcare," Mazzaro said. "I assumed that anyone who served would get it, but I've since learned that is not the case. Many veterans end their service with chronic conditions like diabetes, heart disease and post-traumatic stress disorder. A lot of them left everything behind to serve, and it's worrisome that there are veterans who are not receiving needed care."

Chris Lynch, PharmD, SOP professor and director of clinical programs, suggested Mazzaro pursue this topic as a potential senior research project, to which she readily

agreed. Their research seeks to assess the needs and access to health services for U.S. Military Veterans living in Illinois. Illinois veterans are encouraged to complete the brief online survey and offered a chance to win an Amazon gift card.

“That information can be shared with policymakers to hopefully better serve those who so richly deserve it,” Lynch said.

Today’s pharmacists improve patients’ lives through the medication and education they provide. The School of Pharmacy is dedicated to developing a community of caring pharmacists through a curriculum that is nationally recognized as a model for offering students a unique combination of classroom education, research, community service and patient care. Areas of excellence include a drug design and discovery core, pediatric practice, chronic pain research and practice, and diabetes research and practice.