

Office of Military and Veteran Services Raises Awareness of Critical Issues, Builds Community of Support

by Kalli Collins

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EDWARDSVILLE - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's nationally-recognized Office of Military and Veteran Services is committed to providing support through education and resources to military-connected students as well as civilian campus community members for the mutually beneficial growth and understanding of all.

Critical to that work is raising awareness of both strengths and necessary improvements in the military. Throughout October, the Office of Military and Veteran Services brought civilians, veterans and current servicemembers together through a book group to shed light on military sexual trauma (MST).

The reading and discussion came two years after the murder of Army soldier specialist Vanessa Guillen at the hands of an alleged fellow soldier.

“The murder of Guillen disturbed me to my core, and still bothers me to this day,” said Telisha Reinhardt, assistant director of Military and Veteran Services, who coordinated and facilitated the MST discussions. “Two years ago, when I saw the story featured in the news, all I could think was ‘after all this time the military is still an unsafe place for women.’”

“The murder of Guillen is not an isolated incident,” Reinhardt continues.

“Unfortunately, sexual and gendered violence is a common occurrence in the ranks. There is a long list of women and LBGQTQIA+ servicemembers who have fallen victim to this type of violence. The armed forces have been wrestling with military sexual trauma and violence for decades but are always falling short. Though there have been promises that things will get better with the passage of I Am Vanessa Guillen Act in December 2021, it should not have taken another beautiful life in uniform being cut short to make this happen.”

The event, which was co-sponsored by the Preventative Education and Advocacy Center (PEACe) and the office of Equal Opportunity, Access and Title IX Coordination (EOA), invited SIUE and community participants active in sexual harassment, assault prevention and advocacy to broaden their knowledge as it relates to the military and veteran community. Attendees included students, alumni and faculty from the art therapy program, Department of Art and Design, Counseling Services and STEM Center, as well as community participants from Supportive Services for Veteran Families and Call for Help.

Participants met each Monday in October for an in-depth discussion on military sexual trauma and violence, particularly against female servicemembers. Along with an introduction to military sexual trauma, other topics included the MST reporting process, revictimization of survivors through retaliation and silencing, military legal process policies and compliance, and resources and services available to MST survivors. The meetings were guided by the reading of *Formation: A Woman's Memoir of Rape, Rage, and War* by Ryan Leigh Dostie (2019), originally titled *Formation: A Woman's Memoir of Stepping Out of Line*, academic articles, news articles, and video clips.

Guest speakers were invited each week to share their expertise. Author Ryan Leigh Dostie, a survivor of MST, was the first guest speaker. Dostie shared her inspiration for writing the book and what she hopes the book contributes to the national conversation on MST. The Sexual Assault Response Coordinator at Scott Air Force Base also spoke, sharing on reporting process, services available and advocacy for MST survivors on a military installation. The series concluded with the Military Sexual Trauma Coordinator for the St. Louis VA Healthcare System detailing the resources, services and claims process that the System handled through the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA).

“I could always pick up a book about MST, read it, and get a lot out of it,” said art therapy faculty member Jayashree George. “However, reading a book on the subject as a group was valuable because I could listen to other perspectives, consider my perspective and gain responses from others. Most importantly, I could hear veteran's perspectives. The best part is that I could speak directly to the author of our chosen book. This book group expanded my understanding of the military and gender violence within this context. As a therapist, this was valuable knowledge.”

In reflecting on the conversations, art history professor Katherine Poole-Jones stated “My biggest takeaways were about the overlapping traumas that can be faced by veterans like Ryan. In the case of Ryan, there was not only the trauma of sexual assault, but that was compounded with the trauma of war, which seemed to make it exponentially more difficult for her to heal and feel whole again.”

“Reading *Formation* and participating in the discussions helped me see the parallels between the problem of sexual harassment and assault in academia and military sexual trauma,” said anthropology professor Carol Colaninno-Meeks, PhD. “Seeing these parallels are pivotal to building solutions and structures to prevent and reduce sexual harassment and assault at multiple types of institutions. Bringing together voices from individuals who have had different experiences is powerful for learning and finding solutions.”

Amanda Depew, a SIUE alumni and Air Force veteran, was grateful for the participation of civilians who were willing to expand their knowledge on matters and concerns related to the military and veteran community.

“I’m most appreciative of those who were committed to understanding the culture and environment for women service members and veterans,” Depew said. “As a veteran, I felt seen during these conversations, and I know that my sisters who have been affected by MST in one way or another were also seen and, most importantly, heard.”

Reinhardt is proud that SIUE's Office of Military and Veteran Services was able to bring conversation to campus and raise awareness of an important topic to the civilian-majority participants. She was inspired to bring the conversation of MST and violence when she met art therapy alumni Mariah Picarsic during a student resource fair in 2021. After their meeting, the two began coordinating how to expand the conversation at a campuswide and community capacity.

“As a civilian, this group gave me a space to learn and reflect on the unique ways sexual trauma is experienced in the military in a manner that invited me to consider numerous perspectives,” said Picarsic. “I now have a better understanding of the complex layers of power, fear, silence, and struggle that surround this experience, and what resources can be offered to survivors. This was a hard book to read, but the honesty, thoughtfulness, and authenticity of the group participants gave me courage and space to process my thoughts and reactions to what I was learning.”

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