

ON PAR

Bringing Female Veterans Together on the Golf Course



David Maxwell for The New York Times

Renee Powell, right, provides golf instruction to women who are military veterans, including Christian Turner, through Clearview Hope.

By LISA D. MICKEY

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EAST CANTON, Ohio — She was a soldier. She had seen combat in the desert. So why was she now standing on a driving range with a golf club in her hands trembling with fear at distant fireworks?

“Our golf program is recreational, but for them, it’s also therapeutic,” Powell said. “I looked at existing programs for veterans, and there was nothing especially for women,” said Renee Powell, a member of the P.G.A. of America and an honorary member of the L.P.G.A. Teaching and Club Professionals.

She was at Clearview Golf Club with a group of female military veterans for a program called Clearview HOPE. They were here to learn golf together.

Nobody laughed when she cringed at the faraway pops and booms. Nobody questioned her reaction. Nobody mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder.

They all understood. They were comrades, and they, too, knew fear.

That bond of 50 female veterans in Clearview HOPE, which stands for Helping Our Patriots Everywhere, drew a little tighter that night. And instinctively, when one stumbled, others picked her up.

They had done it on battlefields and on foreign soil, so they could certainly do it on the manicured grass of a golf course in Ohio.

“Our golf program is recreational, but for them, it’s also therapeutic,” said Renee Powell, who created the program in May 2011 at Clearview, a family-owned course she operates with her brother, Larry.

Clearview HOPE was started as a women’s offshoot of the P.G.A. of America’s [P.G.A. HOPE program](#), which has at least a dozen chapters nationwide. That veterans’ program sprung from the Iowa [GIVE initiative](#), an acronym meaning Golf for Injured Veterans Everywhere.

But even with numerous programs for veterans, there has been an absence of participation by women who served in the armed forces. Women have not connected through traditional veteran networks.

According to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs, there are almost 2.3 million female veterans. In Ohio alone, there are an estimated 60,000.

Powell, whose father [served in World War II and then built the family’s golf course](#), is a former L.P.G.A. Tour player. She had traveled to Vietnam on a U.S.O. Tour in 1971 to teach golf to soldiers for three weeks, so when the P.G.A. of America called to ask if she would host a free program in Ohio for female veterans, she agreed.

“I looked at existing programs for veterans, and there was nothing especially for women,” said Powell, a P.G.A. of America member and an honorary member of the L.P.G.A. Teaching and Club Professionals.

Powell asked one of her students, the Army veteran Hollis Burkes, to help her find female veterans in northeast Ohio. She also visited the Department of Veterans Affairs clinic in Canton to leave fliers for enrolled female veterans.

The fliers announced the new group and invited it to a lunch meeting and free golf clinic at Firestone Country Club. Powell offered the veterans five weeks of free golf lessons, supplying clubs and balls at Clearview. “I figured they’d parade us out on [Memorial Day](#) and then forget about us like people usually do,” said Arlinda Mitchell, who served in the Army Reserve for 12 years, part of it in Kuwait.

Nearly 25 women showed up for the group’s first clinic. Some had not seen one another in 20 years. Many were not aware other female veterans lived in the area.

“Hardly anybody knew each other that first day, but then comradeship kicked in,” said Mindy Cooper, a retired Army captain. “It didn’t matter if you were white or black, Army or Air Force, truck drivers or communicators.”

When the golf lessons began a few weeks later at Clearview, 15 women took part. Some came as scouts for others, bringing additional veterans with them the next week. And after the sessions ended, the former soldiers were again surprised when Powell announced plans for continuing group activities for the rest of the year — and beyond.

“This has been about bringing women veterans together to heal,” said Powell.

Their healing has included sharing their experiences. Many of the women report feeling minimized or shunned for their military service. When Mitchell returned from Operation Desert Storm in 1990, she endured a bitter divorce and isolated herself. She worked at a hospital from 5 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and was rarely seen by her neighbors. But she was proud of the personalized Desert Storm Ohio license plate on her car. Once, when a male friend was driving it, a man walked up to him in a parking lot and thanked him for his military service.

“My friend said, ‘I’m not the veteran; she is,’ and he pointed to me,” Mitchell said. “The man looked at me, turned and walked away.”

Burkes, whose 26 years of Army service included tours in Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, now works as a police officer for Canton. On patrol one day, she said, she was called to help locate a missing juvenile.

Burkes stood with the child’s father, staring at a house where the child was possibly being held. The man, a former Marine, wanted to kick down the front door and charge into the house. Burkes reminded him they were in Ohio, not Iraq.

“He said, ‘What would you know about Iraq?’ and I told him I had served there, and he said, ‘You were never in Iraq,’” Burkes said. “I totally lost control of myself and called him everything but a child of God.”

Burkes apologized and went back to looking for the missing child, but she was embarrassed by her reaction and angry at the man’s words.

“Some people diminish you as a woman veteran,” she said. “You want to be evaluated for your merits and not devalued because of your gender.”

Joining Clearview HOPE gave Beth Whitmore a chance to deal with emotions she had suppressed since service as an Air Force intelligence officer during the Vietnam War.

“This group has restored a part of my spirit that has been very badly damaged for a long time,” said Whitmore, [who is now a judge](#). “I’m so lucky, so grateful that I have been able to put aside the burden of rejection that I have carried for years.”

Through golf, the veterans have both calmed the panic of PTSD and experienced the joy of helping a vision-impaired member learn to putt.

“We also let her drive the golf cart once,” said Barb Hickman, the group’s president.

Veterans who are single mothers are invited to bring their children. Several members recently pooled money to buy a set of clubs for a child so she could play with her mother, a Purple Heart recipient.

The group has plans for a family picnic in September, and Powell says she hopes to create a junior program for the veterans’ children. Because Clearview HOPE has become a model program for female veterans, the P.G.A. of America plans to support an expansion of similar programs in Texas and Tennessee.



Renee Powell, left, provides golf instruction to women who are military veterans, and shares a laugh with a military veteran who is a member of Clearview Hope (Helping Our Patriots Everywhere).