

Mayo Clinic Q&A - Caring for veterans - Charlie Hall and Loren Olson

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Halena Gazelka, Narrator, Loren Olson, Charlie Hall

N Narrator 00:01
Coming up on Mayo Clinic Q&A...

L Loren Olson 00:03
It's a day where we can show appreciation and gratitude to all those who gave up a big portion of their lives to serve us.

N Narrator 00:12
Veterans Day is a holiday held on the anniversary of the end of World War One. It's a day to recognize the men and women who have served in the US Armed Forces, to honor them, and to say thank you for their service.

C Charlie Hall 00:24
Veterans are really no different than anyone else that didn't serve. We just got some different stories and they pledged their lives to support our system. So actually just wanting people to be comfortable with what a veteran is.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 00:40
Welcome, everyone to Mayo Clinic Q&A, I'm Dr. Halena Gazelka. Veterans Day is a federal holiday in the United States for honoring military veterans of the United States Armed Forces. The theme for Veterans Day 2022 is honor. And this year, we would like to honor our veterans

by showcasing some of our incredible programs and efforts here at Mayo Clinic. With us today are two Mayo Clinic employees who have been heavily involved in various initiatives and programs to support our veterans. Charlie Hall is a security operations supervisor at Mayo Clinic in La Crosse. Charlie served in the army as an active duty rifle man with a combat tour to the Balkans and as a paratrooper with close to 100 military parachute jumps. Loren Olson is a Mayo Clinic hospice chaplain who often works with veterans and their families as they reached the end of life. Welcome both of you to the program.

C Charlie Hall 01:40
Thank you.

L Loren Olson 01:41
Hi, Halena.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:42
I have to say, Charlie and Loren, that I feel very honored to sit here with you today and be able to talk to you about your experiences and your experiences with veterans. Thank you both for your service.

C Charlie Hall 01:58
Thank you very much. And likewise.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:01
Charlie, let's start with you. Thank you for your service to the military. What is one memory that you'd like to share with us about your time in the service?

C Charlie Hall 02:12
I guess there are just so many in a 20-year active duty career, but that's not much different from a lot of careers in the world. Really, it just comes down to one thing for me really is just pride. Pride in being a citizen of our country and being privileged enough to not only serve for the United States, but also being called into a combat zone. Really, it has been the pride of my life really, in my work life, separate from family and children. That has been an overwhelming theme for me. And you know, otherwise, the two parachute malfunctions I had where I nearly wasn't here anymore. Those were significant events also.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 03:02

Charlie, did you jump again after that? That's the one thing I wanted to ask you about. I am terrified of heights. And I don't know if there's literally anything but someone pushing me out that could make me jump out of an airplane. What was that like?

C Charlie Hall 03:15

Well, it's interesting that you bring that up because I'm also terrified of heights. One of the things that the military does is they train you at 34 feet in a tower. That's where the human brain in most cases can detach from the height aspect. And it becomes more of a like we're riding around in a jetliner aspect and we're not so physical with the ground in close proximity. But I also was afraid, and you know, in the army in the paratrooper world, in the airborne, we have a back on the horse mentality. Very similar to on the farm, the horse bucks you off and you got hurt, you're getting right back on it. And so I jumped. Actually, when you have a malfunction, they require you to go through some extra training. And I think I jumped three times in one day on an afternoon.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:08

Charlie, tell us about the Final Honor Walk program and why it's important to you.

C Charlie Hall 04:15

The final honor program is something that I wanted to develop. I thought we could do more in that area with just being privileged, again, to be able to work with the Mayo Clinic brand and everything that the greatest health care organization on the planet brings. I just thought that we could do more in that area. I had worked with, as I think we're going to talk about later, with the We Honor Veterans program in Rochester, with hospice, and the near end of life things with veterans, all the great things they do there. I had the privilege of doing that, but I saw us being able to do a little bit more in an inpatient setting. And there were some obstacles. As we all know, in a healthcare setting, we have health information obstacles, we have, you know, sometimes it's just really hard to institute a new program. But really the leadership here in La Crosse, and our Global Security Leadership just really made it easy. And we're really on the team to provide a final honor walk, if you will, of veterans, when requested. And usually with family, supported by our staff, as we go through that final walk in the flag draped transport. It's really a special program. It's something that I kind of envisioned, and I wasn't really sure if we were going to be able to pull it off. But, with the great leadership that we have here and as easy as they made it, it really is a rewarding program.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 06:00

It's wonderful, thank you for sharing that, Charlie. Loren, I'd love to pull you into the conversation and have you tell us about your work, and how you help veterans and their families, including the We Honor Veterans program that Charlie just mentioned.

L Loren Olson 06:15

LOREN OLSON 10:15

You know, from spiritual care and end of life issues, we do want to talk to people about what are the really important events of your life, the things you're did in your life to a very meaningful, that helped shape who you are, that help you look back and say, yeah, you know, my being here I made a difference. And for many of our veterans, as Charlie said, there's just really that point of pride. That pride that for a period of their lives, they did kind of leave behind their own agendas, and go to work for our country. Whether it was for our mission in wartime or just peace time serving the country in some way. To resist that feeling that I'm proud of what I was able to accomplish during that period. So in working with veterans, I always try to bring that into the conversation in terms of how that experience impacted their broader journey in life. And oftentimes, you know, that's very positive. You have people have very positive experiences in their service. Some of the best friendships they ever made were in their service. I'm probably doing a funeral on Wednesday for somebody, even though he spent his whole life or his whole military career in cryptology, in small little offices, so working far away from any kind of battlefield. I think, for him that was just such an important part of his life that he served his country in the United States Air Force for four years. And it was a big point of pride for him that he was going to be able to be buried at the State Veterans Cemetery in Preston. That meant a lot to him. So, again, it's that point of pride. There are also those issues that come up, because sometimes being in harm's way, things happen. Charlie had the experiences of parachute failures. Even practicing for combat can be dangerous. I had a patient who did not want to talk about his war experiences at all in Korea, until he got near the end. And then he talked to me about being a Marine machine gunner and mowing down dozens of enemy troops. And just that question of, is God going to forgive me? Will I be welcomed into heaven after I did that? I mean, it's that kind of that could have experienced that, thankfully, I've never had to experience. But you know, some people in service of their country are called into those situations that are unimaginable. Another patient I talked to was in Vietnam, standing on a little footbridge over a creek with his best friend having a smoke. And suddenly a sniper shot his best friend and killed him. And you know they were on a break. And, for him it was the issue of why did the sniper choose him instead of me? Why am I alive and he's not? And again, that question really shaped his life. And even at the end, you can struggle with that question of why did I get to live to be 75 years old, where my friend only lived to be 19. And when those issues come up, for me, it's meaningful to have the opportunity to work with people through those issues, and in a spiritual way and help them find some meaning, find some closure, find some peace.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 10:02

Just to sharing those stories, Loren, makes me sense how important this work is. My own father died on Mayo Clinic hospice here in Rochester and was a veteran and had a veteran's pinning. And that meant very much to him. He didn't remember a lot of things. But he remembered his time in the military and was very proud of it. Then he, too, is in the Preston military cemetery, which is a beautiful spot. What important work you're doing. Tell us what else the staff on hospice do to help build trust with veterans and their families, as you're working with them.

L

Loren Olson 10:42

I think one thing we can do, you know everybody has their own unique experience. And we all live our own lives, we die our own deaths, but I think it's important for us to be aware of the special concerns that sometimes arise with veterans and their families. And like I just talked

about, you know, about the PTSD issues that can come up from service. The missing important events, because you're often deployed, things like that that come up that we can be sensitive to and think about as we're offering our care. So I think it's just part of our commitment to care for our patients and put the needs of the patient first. And sometimes our veterans have special needs. And because of that, we need to be aware of that we need to do some training in that. We need to find ways that we can support them in that journey. And one of those is by honoring them by celebrating their service.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:45

Charlie, can you share with us a memorable moments or achievement that you've had while working with the honor walk program?

C

Charlie Hall 11:54

They're all so special, Halena. As you know, they're all unique. They're all beautiful in their own personal, individual way. But what I do remember is, without getting into any details, we did have a gentleman pass, inpatient, that actually fought alongside of the United States in the Vietnam War, and was a friendly supporter, both militarily and conceptually. And his entire family was upstairs at the time of passing, and they requested us. And that was just another one of the very unique services that our great security team does on a 24 hour a day basis when called upon. They're all unique. All of the situations are different, but that one really sticks out for me because that was what we would refer to as a veteran that completed the mission. At the time all of that happened, he didn't even live in this country. He wasn't even a legal citizen at the time. And for the amount of things that family paid. It was pretty remarkable to be able to be a part of that and have them open up and have us come in and perform that for them. Definitely one I won't forget.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 13:32

Loren, you shared a couple. But I'll ask you the same question. Do you have a story that you would like to share or a memorable moment from working with the We Honor Veterans program or other veterans' initiatives here at Mayo?

L

Loren Olson 13:45

I can think of a few. Several pinning ceremonies that were particularly meaningful. One that comes to mind right away is we had a patient who had struggled with mental illness and addiction much of his life. But to do four years of duty in the United States Army, serving in the Philippines and Korea, and we were able to do a veteran's pinning for him. And what I saw was kind of a transformation because, here we kind of looked at a life where there been a lot of disappointment, a lot of difficulty. But we were able to bring him back to a time when he was a capable human being who did serve four years in the army with distinction. He did a great job. And also, there's that pride of country. We were able to remind him of a time when it wasn't all

about his problems, a time that he was serving others, when he was doing useful things. And I know he talked about that for weeks and weeks after that pinning ceremony because it just meant so much to him to be honored and to bring back those memories of his military service.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 15:03

Can I ask you one question to describe for those who have not experienced it what a pinning ceremony is?

L Loren Olson 15:10

Sure. So it's just a small, simple way of saying thank you to a veteran. We come into the veteran's home or wherever they're at, and we usually bring a pillowcase that represents the branch of the service that they served in, and a small little pin they could put on a lapel, or a lot of them put them on their military hats, and a coin from Mayo expressing our appreciation for their service, and a certificate. And we'll just do us a short little ceremony just saying thank you. First of all, we invite them to share, like you invited Charlie, some special experiences from their time in the military. And, and then we just do a short ceremony thanking them for their service. And then if they're open to it, we offer a prayer, a blessing for them at the close of the service. So and it's a ceremony that can take just five minutes, but I was at one last week that took an hour and 20 minutes, because we just got this veteran talking about his experiences. He was just having so much fun and brought us into the fun. So the ceremony went on and on and on, and we all loved it. It was a great time.

C Charlie Hall 16:33

Loren, if I could add one thing off of what Loren mentioned, there are some really beautiful moments in those pinning ceremonies. I personally have witnessed a couple of handfuls of them, of family communicating and getting together when they haven't in a very long time. And some of the conversations needed to happen. And they did. And you know, it was just a very beautiful, unique experience that's occurring right before your eyes. And you really had no idea that all of this was going to come together like this, but I'm sure Loren, and you've also been through it. Halena, it's just a beautiful time, and there are so many good things that occur there. So I completely agree, Loren, it's just a beautiful scenario, when that all happens,

L Loren Olson 17:31

It's just a beautiful time, and it can be just a Mayo employee and the veteran, or it could be, as Charlie says, I've been in a room with 30 people that are family members who gathered to celebrate that event for that person.

C Charlie Hall 17:48

I actually emceed an event in Minnesota. It was going to be planned as just one veteran and a few family members. And the home set up a microphone and they invited the entire home into the area. And I think I had over 100 folks. We had every veteran that wanted to be in that

the area. And I think I had over 100 folks. We had every veteran that wanted to be in that ceremony was in that ceremony. They came through, some on wheelchairs, they saluted the veteran, the family and just the entire atmosphere in the way that it was all set up. I did not plan on that. But I ended up being the emcee for a group ceremony, which was beautiful. And I'll never forget that one either.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:39

Oh, that is wonderful, Charlie, thank you for sharing that. Charlie, what does Veterans Day mean to you as a veteran?

C Charlie Hall 18:50

That's interesting. You know, a lot of times people don't understand why veterans don't necessarily get too excited about holidays that are made on their behalf. That's not the norm usually in our country. But when we see Memorial Day come along, I know personally, for me, knowing I had three fellow soldiers that were killed in both Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, killed in action, Memorial Day is difficult for me. I completely pretty much dismiss it and I think there are a lot of fellow veteran brothers and sisters out there that just want that day to be done. Maybe similar to someone that lost a family member on a holiday. And that holiday comes around and it's like I can't wait until midnight, you know? And that really, for me, is difficult. But Veterans Day, now that is for all veterans to celebrate serving. Unfortunately, sometimes, and we may get into this later, but one of my wishes would be that if people could really distinguish between Memorial Day and Veterans Day, and you really have to kind of think about it and research it. Memorial Day is for those that gave their life in battle, or in training for the country. And Veterans Day, is to appreciate all veterans that have served and there really is a distinction that sometimes, you know, people don't all know. The media gets it confused a little bit, sometimes, not by any fault of their own, and not by any fault of anyone. But it's the separation of the two I think is really important. But Veterans Day has always been great. I always do make my best opportunity to get out to whatever events we can in my hometown, in my local town with the American Legion and the soldiers, Veterans of Foreign Wars. So it really is a great day. It's a great chance to honor all of those that served.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 21:12

Wonderful, Loren, what does Veterans Day mean to you?

L Loren Olson 21:17

I think, as Charlie said, I think it is a day where we can show appreciation and gratitude to all those who gave up a big portion of their lives to serve us. Like I think of my grandfather, who was a World War One veteran, an ambulance driver in France, and Veterans Day was a highlight for him, just a point of pride and just time to celebrate. And he loved to tell the stories of his year in France. And my uncle did three tours of duty in Vietnam. And you just want to say

thank you. We just want to say thank you for we who benefit from their service. And I think it is great to have a holiday that's just based on gratitude. And you don't have to go out shopping for anybody, you don't have to cook big meals. You just have to say thank you for your service.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 22:19

I love that. And I try to do that for each and every patient who comes in my office if I find out that they're a veteran. Often they're wearing a hat, like you said earlier, and I'll thank them for their service, because we're so grateful for that. On Veterans Day, what are some of the ways, Charlie and Loren, that Mayo staff honor our veterans who are with us?

C Charlie Hall 22:42

Well, I think Halena, you just hit on a big one. I do the same exact thing. When I'm in the clinic here, anywhere on campus, or any of our clinics in the region, if that veteran is wearing a hat that signifies their veterans status if you will, that to me is the okay to come up and thank them for their service. And I do that routinely here. It's usually a surprise to the veteran. They're usually extremely grateful. And that probably is the number one thing is to acknowledge them. It's so important in our environments to make people feel at ease when care is coming, especially when there are some complex situations with medical care. There's some very sensitive conversations that have to happen. We all know that happens so much easier when we have great rapport with our patients. So really, with the recognition of on the outward part of wearing the hats, but also on the on the inside in the exam room, for example. Not that I've ever been there, but I can imagine as a patient in an exam room to have some of those potential stigmas that come along with your veterans service. Circling around mental health issues, homelessness issues, and all of the terrible things that happen in all of our society, but within the veteran segment, there is quite a big incidence of that. To kind of make that veteran feel at ease if you will. And to not be afraid, if that's not too hard of a word. Because they sense that, and a lot of times it won't be a productive conversation. So communication through all of the different techniques that we use to make people feel comfortable and that they're wanted here, they're appreciated, and we thank them. Veterans, that's just one facet of what everyone does in this world. And we thank our patients for everything that they've done good in this world and to make them feel comfortable and at ease and to keep that communication going. So that would be the the main topic for myself is what we can do is just to make that veteran feel comfortable, be confident in their presence, and show appreciation.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 25:33

That's wonderful. It's kind of like what we would want to do for every patient who comes through the door with a little added thank you for being a veteran. I love that, Charlie. Loren, what are your thoughts? What do Mayo staff do to honor veterans on Veterans Day and on a daily basis?

L Loren Olson 25:53

My experience with Mayo it's just that honoring veterans as part of the culture, at least in my experience, the hospice at Mayo. One of the first things I learned as I came to work the hospice

experience, the hospice at Mayo. One of the first things I learned as I came to work the hospice program was that We Honor Veterans partnership with the Veterans Administration is important to us. We want to honor that. We want to lift it up, we want spent time honoring our veterans. So I do think we have developed a corporate culture that just helps us to think of the specific needs of other veterans in ways that we can be thankful. So I just appreciate that in terms of my experience with Mayo.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 26:34

All right. Last question for both of you. This is your opportunity to educate us. What do you wish that more people knew about veterans? We'll start with you, Charlie.

C

Charlie Hall 26:46

It's really difficult to to answer your question Halena, because it is a bit complicated. Obviously, if we don't have experiences in life that other people have gone through, it's going to be very difficult to ask the question, well, why don't you consider this or do you know what I went through. And really, it goes through all facets of our lives, regardless of what occupation you're in, but specifically to veterans. there, as I hit on some of the issues. Some of the possible stigmas of mental health, homelessness, alcoholism, things of that nature, have hit that small percentage of veterans for this country very hard. I heard a statistic less than 1% of all Americans will serve their country or honorably served their country at some point in their life. That's a very small percentage. So when issues do happen within that group, there are going to be some things that come along with them. So again, it will come back to making the veteran feel comfortable, and just know that they went out there and they did everything they could to preserve our way of life. And none of them that I've ever met, and I don't believe I ever will, require a dime from anyone or want anything said to them. But they feel that appreciation. And that's really the big thing that I would like people to understand is, veterans are really no different than anyone else that didn't serve. We've just we just got some different stories and they pledged their lives to support our system. So really just wanting people to be comfortable with what a veteran is.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 29:01

Loren, do you have any thoughts on what you wish others knew about veterans whom you have worked with?

L

Loren Olson 29:08

I think the point Charlie made from his own personal experience. Charlie, of course has done a lot more with veterans than I have. I appreciate that, Charlie, the way you support your brothers and sisters in arms. I think as you say a small percent serve now. And a lot of us aren't touched by military life as prior generations where you had the major wars with big call ups of people. But there are some unique experiences that can come from that in terms of the PTSD. We know that veterans have a higher rate of depression, higher rate of suicide than the general public. So just some sensitivity to those issues. We're all the same, but the military experience is a unique experience, and it can create challenges in person's life. So I think just some

supporting some of the kinds of programs that are developed to help the veterans is helpful, is useful. I think we could do more for veterans, but at the same time, at least, it's a start to say thank you. Thank you for that unique experience, that unique commitment that they make on our behalf.

C Charlie Hall 30:28

Thank you.

L Loren Olson 30:29

I agree with that. And thank you Charlie and Loren for being here today.

C Charlie Hall 30:40

Thank you, Halena. For acknowledging the programs with the We Honor Veterans hospice, and our inpatient Final Honors program here. Your podcast here is going to bring so much more support to those programs when they desperately need to be acknowledged and folks need to hear what's available there for their patients, especially nursing and folks like that. So thank you so much for organizing this and what a great time of year with Veterans Day to have this discussion. So thank you. I agree. We want to bring more attention to those programs. Thank you, too. Loren.

L Loren Olson 31:31

Thank you, Halena. And, and thank you, Charlie.

C Charlie Hall 31:34

Thank you, Loren, for everything you're doing.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 31:36

Our thanks to Mayo Clinic's Charlie Hall, and Loren Olson, for joining us today to talk with us about taking care of veterans on Veterans Day. If you're a veteran, we thank you. Thank you for your service. Thank you for guaranteeing the safety of each of us. If you're not a veteran, I encourage you today to find a veteran to thank on Veterans Day.

N Narrator 32:00

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