



A Closer Look at the Focus Forward Fellowship: A Firsthand Experience (Part 2)

A podcast interview with Diane Darling

<https://militaryfamilieslearningnetwork.org/podcast/a-closer-look-at-the-focus-forward-fellowship-a-firsthand-experience-part-2/>

Podcast Transcript

[INTRODUCTION THEME MUSIC]

JENNY REA (HOST): In today's podcast, I have the opportunity to chat with Diane Darling, a Focus Forward Fellow of the 2017 cohort, and a current coaching mentor. In the Air Force, she was a Mandarin Cryptologic Language Analyst. That is a mouthful! And Diane is currently a clinical psychology Ph.D. student and works part-time as a financial coach for women, couples, and veterans. So, without further ado, I'm going to let Diane introduce herself, and share with our listeners who you are.

DIANE DARLING (GUEST): Sure, thanks Jenny! As you know, my name is Diane. I served in the Air Force for 6 years as a cryptologic language analyst. When I got out in 2014, I worked at the University of Arizona for several years while earning a bachelor's in psychology and then a master's in human development. In 2020, I decided it was time to change careers completely and pursue my lifelong dream of becoming a clinical psychologist. So I'm now in my second year of a clinical psychology PhD program, where I focus my research on financial psychology. I work part-time as a financial coach for women, couples, and veterans, and specifically love working with women veterans! In my dwindling free time, I like to read, lift weights, and go for hikes with my fiancé and stepson. Maybe most relevantly, I am also a graduate of the Focus Forward Fellowship program!

JENNY: You have so much to share about you and I know that this is a little bit off the subject, but could you share a little bit about what financial psychology is? Just for my own personal curiosity..

DIANE: I sure can, yeah. Financial psychology is essentially the study of emotions and behaviors and how they relate to money. So how people deal with money... perhaps archetypes that were demonstrated by their parents like the “saver” or the “spender” ...and how those have created different types of emotions and how they invest and save their own money.

JENNY: That’s fantastic! I feel like that’s right along the lines of what I’m very interested in as well. So, very cool! Thank you for sharing that little tidbit of information.

So, in a previously recorded podcast episode that I did with Dr. Kenona Southwell and Keara Ludiker, we talked about the Focus Forward Fellowship. And for those listening, you’ll have to check out that previous podcast, it’s under our Military Families Learning Network page. It’s called: *A Closer Look at the Focus Forward Fellowship: Meeting Women Student Service Members and Veterans Where They Are*. So that was the part 1 part and this here, with Diane, today, we are talking about part 2.

And so, kinda diving a bit more further.. I’m really wondering more about.. if you could provide your perspective of what the Focus Forward Fellowship was to you? And how you found out about it?

DIANE: Sure! I found out about the Fellowship through my school’s vet office newsletter. I had the opportunity to attend as a Fellow in 2017; and at the time, I didn’t really understand what I was applying for, I just thought it looked like something good for my resume. I ultimately loved the program so much that I begged them to let me continue to participate in whatever way I could after I graduated! Since 2017, I have returned every year to serve as a mentor to fellows in the program.

The Focus Forward Fellowship, as you know, is an opportunity specifically for female veterans working on their degrees in higher education. There are many community offerings for women students or veteran students as separate groups, but I don’t think I realized how unique it is to fall into both demographics until attending the fellowship. I also don’t think I realized how few women veterans I had in my circle - again, I had lots of women... lots of veterans... but not many people that could understand my experiences from both perspectives.

JENNY: That’s interesting. I’m glad you shared that because I think that when I was talking with Kenona and Keara they had shared all these aspects of how there’s this multisectionality of inter [intersectionality].. like your identity.. so you’re coming from all of these different places and all of these different hats .. and I think you hit the nail on the head there where you are coming from all of these different places.. backgrounds.. you are a woman of different hats.. and I think that the Focus Forward Fellowship sounds like you were kind of able to use that space to foster and create your own identity.. a new identity.. for how you were developing.. starting fresh, I guess. So I don’t know.. if that was exactly.. if I was exactly hitting the nail on the head there or if you see it differently..?

DIANE: Yeah, I think there is really something unique about having a space where like I said you're kind of meeting in a place of shared knowledge and you're not necessarily.. you're not in a position where all of your experiences have been entirely different. And so you know we are all coming from.. we are all intersectional women... were all coming from really different experiences... just having that shared experience of all being veterans and all being woman who were in the military.. I think even if our military experiences were vastly different it still gave us a commonality of experience. And it was always nice to not always have to explain that to my fellow sisters. There's situations and experiences that each of us have had that each of us don't have to explain to each other. And that's really freeing.

JENNY: Sure. And it kind of.. I think as Keara had mentioned too that it was basically.. kind of where you didn't have to give everybody that background.. you just kind of went right there.. and you jumped right in. And a lot of the other women were supporting each other.. they showed up for one another. It's just really powerful. And I think that the Focus Forward Fellowship, as you mentioned, you were just begging them that, please let me stay.. let me help out in anyway and I'm sure that they loved having you as well. Maybe you could share some of your highlights of your own personal experiences with that fellowship? What were the main things you took with?

DIANE: Yeah so, I think that the most apt analogy I have .. and I've said this to anyone that's asked me about the fellowship.. but what I experienced while at the fellowship in 2017 was the feeling of being at the starting block before a race. I felt like I was waiting for this figurative race gun to go off to give me permission to start living the rest of my life with a new vigor. Through every activity, I knew that the guidance I was receiving would allow me to attack my academic and professional goals. So for example, the month I got back from the fellowship, I applied for a job that was frankly a huge jump from my position at the time - and I got it! And I never would have applied had I not received not only the knowledge from the fellowship activities, and specifically encouragement from the staff at MFRI and my fellow sisters.

The fellowship, as I mentioned, also opened up my circle of support to other women veterans. There is something uniquely special about not having to explain aspects of your past experiences to someone - you are meeting at a common level of knowledge and don't have to explain yourself when talking to your sisters at the fellowship. This is something I frankly didn't even know I was looking for, but honestly is the most important thing I got from my fellowship experiences.

JENNY: Wow. That's so powerful. I got goosebumps when you were talking about that. I don't know there's just something about this population of veterans .. and women.. and students.. and all of that combined just makes me kind of have a strong passion for and I feel that like you said it kind of like gave you this jump to get your started on your life. And it's just interesting that the things you learned from the Fellowship allowed you to you know leap to a new area

that you wouldn't have saw possible. And so encouragement.. I see... a lot from this program as well. And so how did it assist you in that transition from civilian life through your day-to-day and as well as like attending college? How did the program do that?

DIANE: Yeah, so, as I mentioned, after the Fellowship, I found myself able to apply for jobs I never would have applied for without the encouragement and knowledge I received from the fellowship. The resources that they provided to me, including the human connections, almost certainly were the boost I needed to get into my dream PhD program several years later. Even several years from graduating from the fellowship and even the human connections have impacted me in several years later. Most importantly, and most surprising to me, the friendships I made through the fellowship have completely changed my life and way I view myself in the context of being a woman veteran.

JENNY: Wow. Yeah, could you share just a little example of what that might look like? Like how you view yourself .. view yourself differently in the context of being a woman veteran and do you still kind of define yourself as that today? I'll stop there.

DIANE: I think that getting out of the military I would have not called myself a veteran readily. I don't think that I would have owned that title and you know using things .. there are resources available to veterans like many universities have a veteran's office or a military-connected student's office. I would have never gone there before the fellowship.

JENNY: Interesting!

DIANE: and then after the fellowship I found myself getting involved in more veteran-friendly and veteran-specific activities and programs. I currently work as a student worker at our vet's office while I'm doing my PhD. And so its just really connected me with... not only the women I met at the fellowship, but also the people that I meet that are veterans that now I can have this connection with that I wasn't really comfortable owning until prior going to the fellowship.

JENNY: Mhmm. Yeah and I don't think that you're alone. I feel like there's a lot of other students who are veterans that don't utilize those services and I think that a lot of them are women. And so it's interesting. I would love to dive a little bit further into that... just ..maybe did you think that you.. the services were not.. I don't know.. why did you not want to use them?

DIANE: There's a combination of things. I think that one of the unexplained things or more nebulous things is you know women veterans don't utilize their benefits as much as others...so they don't utilize their VA benefits...you know talking about disability .. you know they don't do that. They don't get healthcare at the VA at a higher rate as compared to male veterans.

And so if they aren't using these really basic services that they earned, they're probably not thinking that they are able to use these other peripheral services like things that are offered on a higher education campus or university campus.

I think that this opportunity probably provided me a way to see other women that were in my position. You know I didn't really have a lot of.. as I mentioned.. a lot of women veterans that I was interacting with and so there wasn't really a template for me.. if that makes sense.. there were no real role models that were women veterans. There were women that I admired. There were veterans that I admired. But no one who was really occupying that shared space. And so I think that being able to see all these women who were claiming this identity was really empowering for me.

JENNY: That's awesome! I'm so glad that you found the Fellowship and that it really benefited you and that you were really able to thrive from it. I wonder if there is anything that you would change about your experience?

DIANE: There's nothing honestly! It was the most wonderful experience.. I .. there's nothing that I would change!

JENNY: OK, good. I didn't think so, but I just thought I would ask.

So, I want to shift gears just a little bit because I'm still really interested in that Clinical Psychology and maybe that'll be my next avenue of life.. I don't know, but I want to talk a little bit about what your current work is... You're currently working towards a PhD in Clinical Psychology, and it's super fascinating! I'm interested in learning about some of those practical implications that we can share with our listeners. And also these can kind of be from your Focus Forward Fellowship experience as well.. kind of what you've learned and what you might be able to share with .. as you might soon.. as you'll soon be a licensed practitioner working with other military families or other personnel or even just professionals who might be working with military families down the road. So what might you be able to share with our listeners kind of from what you've learned ... what you're currently learning... just based on your experience?

DIANE: Sure. So, I have about four years before I graduate, so I won't be working in a therapeutic capacity for a while with this demographic! That said, my research and clinical experience has definitely shifted as an effect of having attended the Fellowship. As I talked about my own identity as a veteran and how I interact with my fellow veterans has completely changed and has encouraged me to hopefully work with this demographic clinically in the future and perhaps do some research on this demographic. In the meantime, my PhD research focuses largely on financial psychology, the study of emotions and behavior as they relate to spending, saving, and investing decisions. I am currently working to be certified as a financial therapist and working with women veterans is certainly my favorite demographic for working in the financial coaching arena!

As far as working with folks.. professionals who serve service members, their families, or veterans, I think it is incredibly important to understand that not every veteran's experience is the same - it's not safe to assume that everyone was in the Army and what's to be called soldier, that everyone deployed, that everyone has PTSD, or that everyone is even proud of their veteran identity. Recognizing, largely, that this demographic has a set of experiences that differs from more traditional students in higher education and listening to them individually to better understand each unique experience is the most important aspect of helping this demographic.

JENNY: Yeah. I couldn't agree more and I think that a lot of it.. a large part of it.. is just listening.. being able to share experiences.. to share opinions.. if the student feels comfortable doing that and if not, then maybe providing resources like the Focus Forward Fellowship or sharing the Vet student center on college campuses. I think that these spaces would hopefully allow the students to be able to adapt.. because they're valued.. and that if they don't want to share about themselves then they don't need to. But like you said, the Focus Forward Fellowship was kind of one of those resources that allowed you to kind of transition more smoothly...maybe... to the college campus and be able to utilize those services a bit better.

So, what other final thoughts might you have? What are the tidbits, the take-homes, the "boots on the ground" kind of statements that you might want to share with our listeners today?

DIANE: Yeah. Mostly I just really hope if you're going to take one thing home with you today.. If you are a woman veteran, do yourself and your future self a favor and apply for the Focus Forward Fellowship! You will earn tools you knew you needed to improve on, and some that you had no idea you needed. You will make connections that will simply make your life, and your future, better. You will meet a remarkable group of people: not only your amazing cohort, but also a carefully curated group of mentors who care about you. Lastly, the fellowship gives you something that you simply can't get in other spaces. You can be you, a military-connected woman, and really take the time to learn about yourself. You can learn about how to harness the entirety of what you are, and magnify those parts that will help you be successful in academia, your career and your personal life. I cannot stress this enough — I am still in awe at how aptly every activity pulled me toward knowing myself in a way I could not have previously imagined.

JENNY: That's awesome. Thank you so much for sharing that, Diane. And I hope that the listeners today are able to take that in and are able to move forward with it as well. And if there not able to get into the Fellowship, to keep trying .. or even you know.. be able to reach out to you ...

DIANE: Absolutely!

JENNY: Or some of the other people from the Focus Forward Fellowship.. you know, Kenona and Keara are open for questions and so I'm just going to leave that there for people to check out.

DIANE: Perfect.

JENNY: Thank you!

DIANE: Yeah! Thank you so much for having me!

[CLOSING THEME MUSIC]

JENNY: From all of us at the Military Families Learning Network Family Transitions team, we thank you, Diane, so much for your time chatting with me today. For those listening, thank you for joining us. I encourage you to refer to the resources mentioned in this podcast on our webpage, under the list entitled additional materials. We encourage our listeners to check out other podcasts, blogs and free webinars from our Military Families Learning Network Family Transitions website at MilitaryFamiliesLearningNetwork.org

[CLOSING AWARD STATEMENT]