

‘I’m a walking miracle’

After overcoming addiction and adversity, a Dallas veteran shares her restored hope with others



Jeffrey McWhorter/Special Contributor

Deanna Sanders, a U.S. Navy veteran who has received assistance from the Veterans

Center of North Texas, is now committed to sharing her restored hope with others. As a member of the executive board of the Lighthouse Foundation, she mentors high school students who are weighing different career options.

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PERSEVERANCE

Ask Deanna Sanders how she's doing, and her answer is enthusiastic.

"If I was doing any better, the angels would be jealous," Sanders says.

Her effusive smile confirms that sentiment.

Sanders has every reason to be doubtful about the future. The Dallas resident has seen her share of troubles in recent years. But Sanders believes falling down and learning from mistakes can actually be the most rewarding outcome.

"I look at life as a lesson learned. I believe I'm a walking miracle," Sanders says.

The youngest of four children, Sanders was raised in San Antonio and Port Lavaca in a strict Pentecostal family. Parties and teenage activities were carefully monitored and often forbidden. It wasn't until college that she saw her first movie.

"It was like Growing up Duggar," Sanders says, referring to the book and popular reality TV show about a large Baptist family. "My life was in a box."

However, it was the conservative teachings of her childhood that have sustained and supported her throughout her life.

"My religious upbringing has had a major influence on me," Sanders says. "Having a strong faith is what has carried me this far. I run toward God and cast my cares on him."

A dedicated student, she received a full scholarship to Bee County College (now called Coastal Bend College) in Beeville, Texas.

The newfound independence, however, pushed Sanders off balance.

"I was socially unprepared for what life would bring. I was naïve. I didn't know about responsibility," says Sanders, 47.

After a year, she dropped out, choosing to hang out with a collection of newfound friends. The group included drug dealers and convicted criminals.

"I got mixed up with the wrong crowd," Sanders says. "My parents were mortified."

Committed to turning her life around, Sanders looked to the military to give her the structure and opportunity she needed. She joined the Navy at age 21 intent on building a new life dedicated to serving her country.

Training in Florida didn't go as expected.

The first of a series of medical issues forced her to leave the service on an honorable medical discharge, discouraged and depressed.

"I was searching and grasping. I spiraled into drug addiction that would last 20 years," Sanders says.

A series of temporary jobs and short-term relationships led Sanders to Michigan, where she made the decision to break her habit.

"I was 36. I was high on crack, living in someone else's bedroom. I remember thinking, 'This is my life.' At that moment, I stopped," Sanders says.

Rising again was not without challenges.

A seizure put her in the hospital, leading to several surgeries and a diagnosis of cardiomyopathy, a disease of the heart muscle and a leading cause of heart failure.

Although the event left her with a lifetime of medication and a pacemaker, Sanders saw the bright side. The downturn provided fresh perspective and direction for the future.

"Life situations have allowed me to persevere. My father, a pastor, taught me to walk by faith," Sanders says.

A return to Texas with her boyfriend in 2018 brought opportunities for personal and professional growth. With a new apartment in Dallas and a new job, the future was bright.

But one day, a return home after work changed that view. The boyfriend was gone, along with money they had saved together.

Through a helping hand from the Veterans Center of North Texas (VCONT), Sanders began a new chapter.

"If it wasn't for them, I'd be homeless,"

Sanders says.

An all-volunteer nonprofit organization, VCONT provides veterans with financial assistance and referral services to a network of public and private agencies for services and support.

Sanders not only received financial help, but a volunteer mentor who offered weekly support and referrals. Financial and employment resources and legal aid guided her

along a path to recovery.

“The volunteer would call me and ask, ‘How’s your day?’ He gave me hope and humanity I never had before,” Sanders says.

Sanders is now committed to sharing that restored hope with others. She is a member of the executive board of the Lighthouse Foundation, an organization that mentors high school students to start thinking about career directions.

“It gives me the ability to connect with someone that is also struggling and give them hope and strength,” Sanders says.

“In that process, I gain strength.”

The journey back has not been without bumps in the road. The COVID-19 crisis resulted in Sanders losing her job.

Always an optimist, she had a vision and foundation for the future through employment counseling from VCONT.

Now with a new job as a banking specialist at a global services firm and in good health, she believes her life is changing for the better.

“I may be broken, but I’m not beaten,” Sanders says. “Life is about second chances.”

Nancy Baldwin is a Plano freelance writer.

To get help

Veterans needing help can call 214-600-2966 or visit veterans.centerofnorthtexas.org.

“I LOOK AT LIFE AS A LESSON LEARNED.”