



WAR MEMORIAL CENTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Grades 6-8/9-12

Forging Your Own Path: One Woman's Story of Lifelong Growth

This lesson explores the notions of growth and progress through the story of Cold War Veteran Yolanda Medina, who served in the Marine Corps from 1981 to 1985. Although Medina joined the Marines because of her boyfriend, she would come to see how that decision put her on her own path toward self-realization.

Length

2-3 class periods

Suggested modifications:

Use Worksheet 2 if lesson plan is used in conjunction with veteran interviews and QnAs.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this class, students will be able to:

- Evaluate and analyze an oral history interview as a primary source;
- Understand how the social category of gender affects lives of individuals on the example of women in armed forces;
- Determine how individual experiences can be shaped by social expectations and how an individual can break away from social expectations to forge their own path;
- Determine different meanings of service;
- Discuss how culture may affect our personal choices and decisions;
- Construct evidence-based arguments to support a thesis;
- Understand how an individual story can be used to illustrate and explain events and processes that affect a large number of actors.

Wisconsin Standards for Grades 6-8

Content Area: Social Studies Inquiry Practices and Processes (Inq)

- Standard SS.Inq3: Wisconsin students will develop claims using evidence to support reasoning.
 - Inq3.a: Develop claims to answer an inquiry question
 - SS.Inq3.a.m: Develop a debatable and defensible claim based upon the analysis of sources.
 - Inq3.c: Elaborate how evidence supports a claim
 - SS.Inq3.c.m Analyze the extent to which evidence supports or does not support a claim, and if it does not, adjust claim appropriately.

Content Area: Behavioral Sciences (BH)

- Standard SS.BH1: Wisconsin students will examine individual cognition, perception, behavior, and identity (Psychology).
 - BH1.a: Individual cognition, perception, and behavior

- SS.BH1.a.m Identify patterns such as culture, prior knowledge, family, peers, school, communities, and personal interests that influence a person’s cognition, perception, and behavior.
 - BH1.b: Personal identity and empathy
 - SS.BH1.b.m Analyze how culture, ethnicity, race, age, religion, gender, and social class affect a person's self-image and identity and interactions with others.
- Standard SS.BH2: Wisconsin students will investigate and interpret interactions between individuals and groups (Sociology).
 - BH2.a: Relationship of people and groups
 - SS.BH2.a.m Summarize the role culture plays in personal and group behavior.

Wisconsin Standards for Grades 9-12

Content Area: Social Studies Inquiry Practices and Processes (Inq)

- Standard SS.Inq3: Wisconsin students will develop claims using evidence to support reasoning.
 - Inq3.a: Develop claims to answer an inquiry question
 - SS.Inq3.a.h Develop a defensible claim to provide focus for an inquiry that is based upon the analysis of sources.
 - Inq3.c: Elaborate how evidence supports a claim
 - SS.Inq3.c.h Analyze the extent to which evidence supports or does not support a claim, and if it does not, adjust claim appropriately.

Content Area: Behavioral Sciences (BH)

- Standard SS.BH1: Wisconsin students will examine individual cognition, perception, behavior, and identity (Psychology).
 - BH1.a: Individual cognition, perception, and behavior
 - SS.BH1.a.h Analyze biological and environmental factors that influence a person’s cognition, perception, and behavior. Explain the interaction of biology and experience (i.e., nature and nurture) and its influence on behavior.
 - BH1.b: Personal identity and empathy
 - SS.BH1.b.h Examine the effects of discrimination on identity.
- Standard SS.BH3: Wisconsin students will assess the role that human behavior and cultures play in the development of social endeavors (Anthropology).
 - BH3.a: Social interactions
 - SS.BH3.a.h Analyze the means by and extent to which groups and institutions can influence people, events, and cultures in both historical and contemporary settings.

National Common Core Standards (History/Social Studies) Grades 6-8

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8

Grades 9-10 / 11-12

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Background information

Yolanda L. Medina was the first female aircraft technician in the Marine Corps, where she served from 1981 to 1985. Her ancestors were Tejanos, or the Hispanic residents of Texas who are culturally descended from the original Spanish-speaking Mexican settlers of Texas. Her parents, natives of Texas, moved to Wisconsin as migrant workers. Medina was born in 1962 and after graduating from Waukesha High School in 1980, she enrolled at Carroll College in Waukesha, Wisconsin where she majored in theater arts. Although she had a full four-year scholarship, Medina dropped college when her boyfriend, Joe, decided to join the Marine Corps. This is how Medina described her decision in a 2019 oral history interview, “I had no altruistic reasons to join, I just didn’t want to leave my boyfriend behind. Or he leave me behind. So, about a month later after he joined, I told my parents I’m going to go sleep overnight at a friend’s house. Instead I went to Milwaukee and enlisted.”

While Medina claims that her decision had little to do with her desire to serve in the armed forces, she realized very quickly that service was her natural environment, in which thrived. After she graduated second in her class from the training camp in Parris Island, South Carolina on September 8, 1981, she attended her boyfriend Joe’s graduation the next day. Although her parents were initially not thrilled about her decision to quit college, they were incredibly proud to see her graduating. During the training, Medina also discovered that she excelled at mechanical aptitude tests. She decided to develop those talents and pursued aircraft technician training at the Naval Support Mid-South Air Station in Millington, Tennessee. After eloping with Joe in Tennessee, the couple served in Cherry Point, North Carolina, where Medina was assigned to the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, VMAT-203. She worked as an environmental systems technician for the Harrier aircraft and was responsible for air conditioning, ejections seats, and oxygen systems.

The Medinas decided not to reenlist after Joe’s traumatic experience in civil war-torn Lebanon. When Joe was in Beirut, Lebanon’s capital city, 241 service members were killed after barracks were bombed. Joe was tasked with tagging and identifying the bodies of his fellow servicemen. The experience left him scarred for the rest of his life. Yolanda was discharged from the Marines in August 1985. The Medinas eventually decided to move to Texas, where Yolanda did administrative work and Joe pursued a new career of service as a minister. By that point, Yolanda and Joe had four children, two of whom were born when Yolanda was still in service. Before moving back to Joe’s hometown Geneseo, Wisconsin in 1999, Yolanda gave birth to two more children. In 2009, the family moved to Waukesha, Wisconsin, where Yolanda returned to Carroll College to work in administration while Joe worked as a minister. The family was

granted new opportunities but also faced serious challenges. As Yolanda pursued her bachelor's degree and the Medinas engaged in work with local veteran organizations and communities, Joe's health deteriorated. On August 12, 2016, only months after Yolanda received her degree, Joe passed away.

While working at Carroll College, Medina realized that her own experience equipped her with unique credentials to support other veterans pursuing higher education. In addition to being involved in several veteran groups, her administrative work in academia focused on developing policies to help active service member and veteran students. Those efforts resulted in establishing a military and veterans service office at Carroll College in 2015. Medina also continued her education and received master's degree in Adult, Community, and Professional Education. In 2018, she took the position of director of the Military and Veterans Resource Center (MAVRC) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She now plans to join a Ph.D. program, where she would like to research issues related to moral trauma and moral injury. Medina wants to focus on how moral injury differs from PTSD and how this knowledge can be applied to better serve veterans.

This lesson is based on an oral history interview that Yolanda Medina gave in 2019 as part of the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center. For the purposes of this lesson, we have selected excerpts from the interview. You can read or listen to the full interview here:

<https://wisvetsmuseum.com/oral-histories/featured-interviews/i-am-not-invisible/yolanda-medina/>.

In the interview, Medina occasionally reflects on how her identity as a woman and Latina has affected her life, but neither her gender nor her ethnic identity is a central theme of the interview. This itself is telling. Medina matter-of-factly talks about having two children before the end of her term with the Marine Corps, being back at work merely four weeks after giving birth to her first daughter Amanda, being the first female aircraft technician in the Marine Corps, juggling motherhood with service when her husband was deployed overseas, raising six children while working, finishing her degree after her children grew up and while taking care of her sick husband, or getting a graduate degree while working full time, etc. For Medina, these aspects of her life appear ordinary. She even says that she decided to get master's degree when "she wasn't doing anything" while in reality she was working full time. Most adult women recognize immediately the amount of work, effort, and commitment that must have gone into all these accomplishments. This lesson encourages young students (grades 6-8 and 9-12) to recognize that too.

This lesson utilizes Medina's story to illustrate how ordinary women live extraordinary lives every day and how by doing what they do they forge their own path of service, commitment, and growth. We invite students to use Medina's story to reflect on how the social category of gender is linked to certain social expectations that affect individuals lives, but also how we all can break away from these expectations. We also encourage students to think of women in their lives and recognize that what they do every day – at work, at home, at school, in their communities, etc. – is hard work that we, as a society, need to recognize and support.

Terms

Marine Corps
Gender
Social category
Latino/Latina
Hispanic
Aircraft technician
Environmental systems technician
Moral trauma

Materials

- Document 1: Selection from an Oral History Interview with Yolanda L. Medina, conducted by Ellen Bowers Healey, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center, 2019. The complete transcript of the interview is available here: http://wisvetsmuseum.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Medina-Yolanda_OH2153.pdf
- Sheet 1: Forging Your Own Path

Activity 1: Opening activity

- Encourage students to reflect on how women's experiences in the armed forces can be different from the experiences of men because of their gender (or because they are women). Remind students that for thousands of years, in many cultures, military service was considered men's job because women were believed to be too weak to serve. It may be interesting for students to know that there also exist (or existed) cultures with a long history of women warriors, including some indigenous American cultures. Suggested questions:
 1. Do women serve in the armed forces? In what roles do women serve in the armed forces? Do you know any women who are serving or served in the armed forces?
 2. What do women do in the armed forces? Are their jobs, tasks, or responsibilities the same as those of men who serve with them?
 3. Do you think that the experience of women and men in the armed forces is the same or different?
 4. Can you think of any factors or circumstances that will affect servicewomen but will not affect servicemen in the same way?
 5. Explain that students will examine a story of one servicewoman from Wisconsin to explore how the experience of women in the armed forces can be affected by their gender as well as how service can shape individual lives and inspire life-long growth. Introduce Yolanda Medina to students. You may project Medina's profile from the website of Wisconsin Veterans Museum to show students her picture: <https://wisvetsmuseum.com/oral-histories/featured-interviews/i-am-not-invisible/yolanda-medina/>. Students will read excerpts of an oral history interview that Medina gave in 2019. In it, she shares her experience in the Marine Corps and how service has shaped her life.

Suggested approach: For grades 9-12, we recommend introducing and/or discussing the notion of gender as a social category and helping students think about how gender is linked to certain cultural expectations and roles. For grades 6-8, we recommend a discussion on the concept of

gender stereotypes and how gender roles and expectations are created and endorsed by culture/society rather than dictated by biology, especially that by grade 6, most students have some deeply rooted perceptions of conventional gender roles. Examples that illustrate how gender stereotypes can be broken may help to address the issue of existing gender stereotypes. Suggested discussion themes: stereotypically male/female professions and men/women who break professional stereotypes, superheroes (most of whom are men, but we also have some female superheroes), sports (e.g., women play American football, do boxing, or wrestling while men excel at gymnastics or figure skating), etc.

Activity 2

- Provide basic background information about Yolanda Medina: She joined the Marine Corps in 1981, at the age of 19. This is not unusual, but Medina's story has one unusual element: she dropped a full four-year scholarship at Carroll College, where she was completing her first year as theater arts major, to join the Marine Corps to be with her boyfriend Joe. Project the following statement from Medina's interview on a screen or read it out to students: "I had no altruistic reasons to join, I just didn't want to leave my boyfriend behind." Encourage students to reflect on this statement. Why did Medina join the Marines? Do you agree with her decision? Do you think it was a good idea?
- Divide students into pairs or groups of 3-4. Distribute Document 1: Excerpts from an oral history interview with Yolanda Medina (Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center, 2019) and Sheet 1: Forging Your Own Path to each student. Students read the excerpts and complete Sheet 1 in pairs/groups. There are 26 numbered sections of the interview. Students read each section and summarize Yolanda's experiences in one-two sentences. Section 1 is completed as an example to follow.
- Students share, compare, and discuss their responses. Depending on your students' reading proficiency, you may need to break the lesson here. If you do, we recommend the following homework assignment: Read Medina's responses and your summaries of her responses again (Sheet 1). With a highlighter mark five experiences in Medina's story that show that servicewomen are affected by their gender while serving in armed forces (or by the fact that they are women). Explain why you selected those particular experiences. How do they show us the importance and influence of gender in Medina's story?

Activity 3

- If you broke the lesson after Activity 2 and assigned the recommended homework, begin this class period with students reporting their choices and explanations. If not, students work in pairs or groups of 3-4. Follow the assignment suggested as homework assignment at the end of Activity 2. Students report and discuss their choices. Analyze some gender-related issues illustrated by Medina's story with students. Suggested questions:
 1. What do you think about the idea of "breaking down" young men and women when they first join armed forces? Based on Medina's story, do you think that women experienced/experience this process differently than men?
 2. Based on Medina's story, do you think that it was/is easy or difficult to be a servicewoman and a mom? What challenges did Medina face as a pregnant woman and then young mother in armed forces?

3. Why and how did Medina become the first female aircraft technician in the Marine Corps? What do you think about Medina's choice to become an aircraft technician? Why do you think there was no female aircraft technician in the Marine Corps before her?
4. How did Joe's deployments affect Yolanda as a servicewoman, wife, and mom?
5. What do you think about Medina's comment that she did not "fit in" with anyone, because she was a servicewoman and a serviceman's wife while most Marines were men and most servicemen's wives were not Marines?
6. How do you think Joe's decision not to reenlist affected Yolanda? What does his decision tell us about his experience as a Marine?

Activity 4

- Ask students to reflect again on the quote, with which you began this lesson: "I had no altruistic reasons to join, I just didn't want to leave my boyfriend behind." Encourage students to trace Medina's path to understand her personal growth. Suggested questions:
 1. Did Medina's reasons to stay in the Marine Corps change? When? Why? What convinced her that service was part of her personal path, not only a way to be close to her boyfriend (husband)?
 2. Which part of Medina's experience in the Marine Corps do you find the most interesting or surprising?
 3. Which aspects of Medina's experience in the Marine Corps do you find the most impressive or inspiring?
 4. Based on Medina's experience, do you think that it was easy or difficult to be a woman in the Marine Corps in the early 1980s?

Activity 5 (closing activity)

- Point out to students that Medina's story does not end with her service in the Marine Corps. Ask students to briefly summarize Medina's life after she decided not to reenlist.
- Encourage students to reflect on how Medina's life continued to exemplify the notion of personal growth and service after she left the Marine Corps. Help students reflect on unique challenges that most women in our culture face. Particularly younger students may not yet recognize the challenges that, for example, motherhood and career pose for women and how those are different from the experience of fatherhood and career. Suggested questions:
 1. Do you think that it was easy or difficult for Medina to raise six children and work at the same time?
 2. Do you think that it was easy or difficult for Medina to take care of her family as her husbands was pursuing education and new career as a minister?
 3. What do you think about Medina's return to school to complete her degree? When did she do that? Do you know anyone in your life who completed their college (or other) degree after they raised their children and/or served their country?
 4. How does Medina use her own experience to support other veterans?
 5. How has Medina's ethnic identity, or the fact that she is Latina American (she self-identifies as Hispanic in the interview), shaped her experience in service and in civilian life?

6. How has Joe's experience with trauma and pain shaped Yolanda's professional and academic path?
- By now, students should be able to conclude that Medina's life, while it may seem ordinary, has been full of challenges and very hard work, both during her service years and after she left the Marine Corps. Yet, she continued to challenge herself and forge her own path of continuous progress and growth. Ask students to reflect on the women in their lives, who are their role models (mothers, grandmothers, aunts, etc.). Encourage them to think of everything that the women do every day. Do the women, like Medina, excel at everything, despite having many responsibilities? Do we recognize and appreciate the efforts that the women around us put in their work, their families, their communities, etc.?

Suggested additional assignments

For grades 6-8: Conduct an interview with a woman, whose life exemplifies service, commitment, and continuous growth. Carefully look around you to find such an individual. Is it your mom? Or grandma? Or sister? Or neighbor? Or maybe someone who works in your neighborhood grocery store or delivers your mail? [For younger students, you may provide specific questions or themes that students should focus on in the interview, e.g., education, family, work, community, etc.]

Writing assignment for grades 9-12: Write an essay about a woman, whose life exemplifies service, commitment, and continuous growth. It can be someone you know or a public figure that you admire and find inspiring. In your essay, reflect on what challenges this person had to face because of her gender and how she overcame those challenges. Why do you admire this person?