



WAR MEMORIAL CENTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Yolanda Medina interview transcript

This document features excerpts from an oral history interview that Ellen Bowers Healey conducted with Yolanda Medina for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center in 2019. Medina served in the United States Marine Corps from 1981 to 1965. You can read the full interview [36 pages] here: http://wisvetsmuseum.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Medina-Yolanda_OH2153.pdf

1. On her family's reaction to her decision to quit college and join the Marine Corps:

My mother was a little stunned. And she didn't say anything for about two days. I mean, she literally did not talk to me for about two days because I was the first of my siblings to graduate high school in the proper time, let alone go to college. So, she was a little upset, disappointed, scared, as all parents would be. ... [When Medina was about to leave for the boot camp] My mother was still angry, but my father started to become—my father was always a huge military buff. He could not go into the military because of health concerns, so he then became very, very proud, and very, very excited for the fact that I was going to be going into the Marine Corps.

2. On her experiences on the way to and at the training camp in Parris Island, South Carolina:

Well, there was a stop in Atlanta, Georgia, to pick up all of the rest of the other women who were coming from the east side of the country. And that's when the first culture shock came. We started off in the aircraft kind of chatting with each other, talking, but then the Dis [drill instructors] showed up in Atlanta, Georgia. And as a woman, you're not used to being yelled at, or bossed around kind of in that way. And so, I wasn't used to people just brusquely yelling orders at me. I mean, a mom is different. She's yelling all the time. But this was different. This was men telling us, you know, in a very rude way I felt, you know, get over here, go over there, shut up, you know, those type of things that people normally didn't say to me. So, I was—it was very, it was very strange, very frightening. And so, we had to be very, very quiet in the aircraft. We weren't allowed to talk. And so, that when we arrived in South Carolina, that's when all of the traditional, you know, get out, get out, get out, move, move, move, get on the feet, you know, the yellow feet that the Marine Corps has. And then my whole world imploded from there. I thought, what did I do.

3. On the impressions of the Marines who trained her at the boot camps:

... What I loved about seeing them was how crisp, and how sharp, and how clean their appearance was. It looked like they took time to be a Marine. And that's actually in boot camp what won me over. That's what made me think, I want to be her, is their appearance of just professionalism, and pride in how they looked in uniform.

4. On her daily experience at the boot camp:

Well, it was standard boot camp fare. You got up early in the morning, you did your PT, or your physical training, you went to the mess hall and ate. I—I thought it was unusual you had to sit straight up in the chair and bring your spoon up, or fork, at a ninety-degree angle, and kind of eat like this. All of course to break you down, and to train you to take orders. But, I mean, I love order, I'm an ordered person, so I was a square peg in a square hole, you know. But I also wasn't there—you could tell some girls were there to prove that they were going to be number one. There were other girls there that were just trying to get through. And for me, I don't know if it was because of my family, and the large unit I came from, I felt like I needed to be a sister, or a helper, or take the hand of somebody who was struggling. So, even though I might have been able to run faster than some people, I would lag behind so I could help the ones that were falling back.

5. On how she became an aircraft technician:

... when I took the test at AFQTs for, you know, math, English, whatever all those things were, I aced the mechanical test. I don't know, I guess that's my brain. And they would show you a toggle switch and say—and then there's this huge schematic on the page, and say, if this flipped here, what happens at the end of the page. And I guess I answered correctly on all of those things. I've got a little mathematical mind. So, Randy, the recruiter said, "Do you want to be a mechanic?" I was like, what? He goes, "I can get you on this really cool aircraft that the Marine Corps has called a Harrier." He goes, "Would you like to do that?" I didn't know any better. I said, "Sure, let's do it." He goes, "Yeah, you don't want to be a grunt." That's the best thing about Randy is that he tried to get us into specialized fields, he didn't try to just recruit us, and then just let us go into infantry and what—and women would go into transportation. He tried to get us into a field where someday we might be able to do something. And so, Joe actually was a unit diary clerk, which you would consider now to be administration field. And he ended up in S-2, which is intelligence in his unit. So, I knew I was going to be an aircraft technician.

6. On her first weeks of working with the VMA-203 training squadron:

There were always men who tried to decide if you were worth being a Marine. So, they would do—they would try to trick you like saying—they'd wrap up something in bubble wrap and say, "I need you to go to the squadron up the road and ask for another ASH receiver." And I'm like, that's an ASH, what's an ASH receiver, what's the ASH stand for. And they're like, "You don't need to know, Marine." And I'd say, "Well, yes I do if I'm going to get the right component." I'd say, "Let me open this up." And I'd see that it was an ashtray. So, they were trying to make me the butt of a joke so I'd go over and say, "I need an ASH receiver." But I have just too logical of a mind, so they couldn't try to fool me in that way. And then they'd—you'd have to checkout your toolkit in order to work on your component parts for the aircraft, and they would try to sneak up and take some so that something would be missing. But once again, I know where my things are, and I'm a very organized person when I'm laying things out. And I'm like, okay, I'm missing this, I'm missing that, and I could tell somebody was, you know, trying to trick me. So, I'd close it up, I'd go in, and I'd just start swearing up a blue streak. "Whoever took this blankety blank tool better give it back to me now, 'cause I know how to shoot a rifle just as well as you do." And then somebody would give me my tool back. So, I kind of earned my respect within the first couple of weeks of being there. ... NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] were outstanding, the officers were really good, everybody was really accepting and very kind, and tried to, you

know, welcome me. And they were too were proud to have women. I was the third woman in my squadron. One was in supply, and the other one was in avionics. So, the commanding officer was very happy to have me there. It was the enlisted, my fellow enlisted that tried to see, okay, let's see if we can break her down.

7. On a particular NCO that stood out:

Halfway through my time in 203 I got a new NC—staff officer for my—we were called the seat mechs, I was an ejection seat technician. So, there was a Staff Sergeant Dewitt, and he was very, very helpful because I had my first two children in the Marine Corps, so, I didn't know what to do, how to be. I didn't have maternity camouflage uniforms, you just bought a bigger, you know, top, so it would accommodate your belly. And you're walking around a flight line with this—you know, waddling along with this big belly. And Staff Sergeant Dewitt was very, very helpful in making sure that nobody tried to give me a hard time. Or when I wasn't feeling well, he would accommodate me. So, he always stands out in my mind. ...

8. On having her first daughter:

Amanda was born in December of '82, so a year [after Medina joined the Marines]. ... I delivered at the naval hospital in Cherry Point. And the thing that stands out to me the most about my delivery is that the nurses were young corpsmen, probably about nineteen, twenty years old, and then of course, a Navy officer. But I remember those young men standing against the wall looking petrified. Absolutely petrified that they were doing a delivery. I don't know if that was in their training or not, but they looked like they did not want to be there. And I remember the lieutenant, or the captain, yelling at them orders about doing whatever, and that I was called by my rank the entire time. So, they were like, "Okay, Lance Corporal Medina, I need you to do this. Okay, Lance Corporal Medina, now push. Okay, Lance Corporal, it's time to do this."

9. In response to how long she was on maternity leave:

Four weeks. And then I went back to light duty. I think we were allowed six weeks, or eight weeks, but I wanted to get back as soon as possible because I knew Joe was deploying in February, and so, I wanted to be up to speed before he deployed. So, it was my choice to go back to work early.

10. On what she did for childcare:

At first I used the base daycare. But I was not comfortable, it was huge, and I did not like it. So, then—but I had friends that I worked with whose wives were not in the military, and their—those women were my babysitters. And then, of course, we found a church. So, church is always helpful when it comes to networking and support.

11. On what type of work she did at the squadron:

... I was an environmental systems technician, so that was air conditioning, ejection seats, and oxygen systems. So, ejection seats of course is in the front of the aircraft, on the Harrier the air conditioning unit is right immediately behind the cockpit, and then the liquid oxygen is in the far back. And then, [clears throat] I'm sorry, air conditioning, ejection seats, oxygen system, okay, yes, oxygen in the back, air conditioning here, ejection seats here. So, these were actually promotional pictures being taken, and I'm sorry that I never kept the recruiting pamphlets. You know, you don't think about those things at the time. But I was an excellent fit for the Harrier because it was a small aircraft, and I'm a small person, so other off—other offices, I'm still thinking back to my academia. Other units within the squadron would say, "Hey Medina, could you come in and try to find this piece." And so, I'd put my hand in and try to find the cotter pin that was lost, or a stud that dropped down, because it was such a tiny, tiny space, that they would call me and ask me, "Hey, can you go dig around in there?" So, despite my having one job in there, I was always the scout, so to speak, for all the missing pieces in the aircraft with all those big men who couldn't fit in there.

12. Yolanda and Joe Medina served and lived in Cherry Point, North Carolina although Joe was deployed several times, so he was often gone. On what they did in their free time in Cherry Point:

Well, we made a lot of friends. And when you're away from home, even though while you're in uniform, you're all Marines. When you come out of uniform you feel out of place as a Hispanic in North Carolina. So, it seemed like all of the Hispanics from the units collected together. So, we made friends with fellow Hispanics. They came to my house because I would cook. And I made friends with their wives, although it was hard to be close friends because I was a Marine, but I was also a wife, and so I kind of didn't fit into anybody's, you know. And I didn't have any—a whole lot of fellow—female Marine friends 'cause I was the only one who was married to another Marine. And so, it was a weird limbo to be in. But we hung out with each other, we went, you know, to the coast, and swam in the water. And we'd drive to friends' houses that were close. Like we went to New Jersey, and to Virginia, for people who lived close. We spent most of our liberty with them. And we only went home twice that I know of while we were in the military.

13. On the biggest challenges that she faced while in service:

It was the amount of time Joe deployed because when other units deployed the wives went home. And when Joe deployed I stayed on base by myself. So, I couldn't go home to do, you know, to stay—to be with somebody while he was gone. I had to be working. And so, I got information faster, knowing where he was at. Because it was not the internet age. It was still when you talked on the phone they had a—you had to say, "Over." You know, "How are you doing, honey? Over." And the operator would hit the toggle switch, and then the other person could talk. That was still in those days. So, but because I was on base I could go over to his unit and say, "Hey, where's the squadron now, how are they doing?" And I could get information faster that way. But it was the amount of deploying that he did, and leaving me alone.

14. Joe, Yolanda's husband, was deployed in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and Lebanon. He was in Beirut, Lebanon when Lebanon was in the midst of a civil war. As Joe's ship was leaving, the barracks were bombed, and 241 service members were killed. Joe, in the words of Yolanda, "ended up tagging and identifying remains of those

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who were killed. And that affected him severely for the rest of his life.” On what happened next:

After that [the events in Beirut] he [Joe] said, “We’re done, we’re out.” And I thought we were going to reenlist. But after he came back from Beirut he said, “We’re out of here.” And of course he had just gotten back, so I got pregnant the second time. So, we were in long enough for me to have my second child. And then we got out. ... I pretty much just agreed only because I noticed the change in him, and I knew that he wasn’t the same. So, I didn’t want him to continue to be angry. And that’s what he was. He was angry. Just so, so angry for years.... And Joe was, you know, turn of the dime kind of person. When he made the decision, that was the decision, he ruled the roost. And so, I grew up with him, this is how our relationship worked, this was the dynamics, he was always Hispanic male head of the household, and I was the accommodating wife.

15. After their terms ended, Yolanda and Joe moved to Texas, where Joe completed seminary and worked as a minister. They stayed in Texas for 11 years and by the time they decided to move back to Wisconsin, they had six children. On the decision to move back to Wisconsin:

So, we were in Dallas for a number of years, Joe started more churches, completed seminary. But it—when our children were starting to get older, and actually my father had passed away in ’99, and I said, “I want to come home.” You know, I want our children to grow up with their immediate family. So, in ’99 we moved back home. ... it was very rarely that I put my foot down about something, but when I did he knew I meant business. So, he said, “Yes, we will go home.”

16. On what she was doing in Texas:

I always worked because in ministry, and in those small independent churches, you don’t make a lot of money. So, I did what I could in the evenings, in the afternoons, mostly administrative work. You know, as a clerical whatever, just so that we could always have insurance, and that we had stable income coming in. ‘Cause as you move from church, to church, to church, you know, your income goes up. I remember Joe’s first check in San Antonio was \$154. And I said, there’s no way on god’s green earth we’re going to be able to support a family of five, you know, or with five children, family of seven, on \$154, so I got a job. And I’ve been working ever since.

17. On life after moving back to Waukesha, Wisconsin:

Well, Joe came back with the intention of starting another church in Pewaukee, which he did. And I went back to administrative work. I worked for GE [General Electric] for a time, I worked for a small IT [Information Technology] company in Hartland for a while, and then I found a job back at Carroll as administrative assistant. And it was perfect. I loved it, I was home, I was with people I knew again, and I stayed there for thirteen years. ... While I was at Carroll, this is when Joe started to become sick. He would drop things, his legs would buckle, he would get dizzy. He couldn’t speak, we thought he was getting something like Parkinson’s disease, or along those lines. We already knew he was diabetic, so we thought maybe it was something along those lines. And so, he was in and out of the hospital constantly. And Joe, I don’t know if he sensed it or what, but he said, “You need to go back to school. You work at Carroll, you can take classes for free.” He said, “Finish your degree.” So, I was like sure, Joe was always directing me. And I loved education anyway. So, I started taking classes. ... And since he was a minister, and this is what we were doing, my degree was in religious studies with a minor in communication. And I

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graduated cum laude, and it was wonderful. He was there at my graduation. But by the time I graduated in May of 2016, he was already in a wheelchair, or walking with braces. We still didn't know what was wrong neurologically, but we also knew he had severe heart disease. And so, he was at the VA in and out, in and out. Actually the day of my graduation party, we had to cancel it because he was hospitalized again. And the doctor said we can't wait any longer, he needs a quadruple bypass and a valve replacement. So, he went in in July, stayed almost the entire month of July, was out for a few days in August, went back into the emergency room August 8, and on August 12th [of 2016] he passed away. So, I was left in limbo, I didn't know what to do. ... And I was still at Carroll. So supportive. They did so much for me. My veterans there that I was working with, they were all just gathered around me. They were just—my children, my family, was wonderful. And so, I wanted to stay there because of the community I created there, but it wasn't enough money. But I had created a community in the whole southwest area with veterans groups, and that's when UW Milwaukee approached me and said, "You know what, we think you're a good fit here in our military and veteran's services, come and apply." And I did, and that's when I got the job in August of 2018.

18. On working with veteran's services groups:

That was accidental as well. And that was about 2010 maybe, 2009. We had a young Marine coming through campus, and he was always angry. Marines are always angry. Because he was deploying in and out, and he was losing credits, he was losing money. He couldn't figure out how to get in and out of the school with his deployments. And he saw my Marine Corps stickers, and things, and the various things I had around my desk, and he said, "You need to tell me as a fellow Marine, how I can navigate this school without losing so much money." And I said, "Those are good questions." And so, we went in and out of various offices and things, and they said, "Well, we've never had this problem before, we don't have that many military at Carroll University." And so, they started to create policy.

19. On working with veterans at Carroll College:

I would be more of a pseudo-advisor and say, okay, you know that you can't drop, or do an incomplete, at this point in time, and a regular student could and walk away, you can't because then you will have to pay back your benefits to the government. So, you need to tough it out, and take as best a grade as you can, or you've got to figure out how to pay back all this money. So, just know—so, those were the little nuances that advisors and the registrars just didn't get. You know, where the—and then there was the reservists getting a whole different kind of a benefit, and then people like me who were Cold War, who didn't qualify for post-9/11, but there were some Wisconsin GI Bill benefits they could get through state schools, that they couldn't get in a private school. So, there was all kinds of little things that other people wouldn't be able to figure out, and we just kind of piecemealed it together.

20. On working with veterans at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee:

[She does the same thing as at Carroll College] But on a larger scale. But the same type of thing. And they're much more organized. They do have a whole office of Military and Veterans Benefits. But that gentleman works with us at the Military and Veterans Resource Center, so that we can make sure that we get the whole picture for the student, academically, and non-academically.

21. On getting master's degree:

Well, I was at a point in my life where I wasn't doing anything. I was just working and coming home, working and coming home, after Joe's death. And then I realized that I wasn't, I wasn't functioning in society. I wasn't present for anything. I avoided everyone. And so, I remember Joe always saying, "You're so smart, but you don't have any common sense." [laughs] So, I said, you know, Carroll pays for a bachelor's and a master's for employees. So, I said it's paid for, I'm going to go. And so, I decided to go into the education field. So, I got my master's degree in Adult, Community, and Professional Education.

22. On using her degree to develop classes that would explore issues that affect veterans:

At Carroll, they have a class called Sorrow and Hope. And I want to incorporate moral injury, moral trauma, which is what I believe Joe had. He did have some PTSD, but he had more of a—his moral base was offended by the actions of the military, and his part in Beirut that really, really affected his spirit, and actually caused him shame. It was in 19—oh gosh, I don't know what year. But when we were in Dallas, Texas he worked at Firestone. And a young lady came in, and she was in a hijab. But she was—had severe burns. You could see it on her hands, and her face. And Joe said, do you mind—and like I said, he always had a compassionate spirit, and he had a way of talking to people. And he said, "Do you mind me asking how you got so severely burned?" And she said, "Yes, when I was a young girl in Lebanon, the Marines bombed my village. And my house was burned, some of my family were lost, and I was burned over eighty-percent of my body." And that was the next trigger for Joe. And this is when he became—he went from angry, to depressed. Because you go into the military thinking you're going to save the world. You're going to bring democracy to everyone on the globe, and do right for everybody. And he realized that the ships that he was on had bombed villages, killed people, and severely marred this young lady for the rest of her life. And he was already a minister, he was bi-vocational. And so, he didn't know how to justify being a religious, spiritual person trying to do right, knowing that he caused so much harm to other people. And he fought, and fought with this in his mind for the rest of his life. And this is where the moral trauma came in, and this is why I'm—this is where my research is, and this is where I want to teach. In how service members not only suffer with the fear base of what they've experienced, but also the moral base of what they've experienced or perpetuated through their military service.

23. On connecting with and becoming active in veteran organizations:

When we moved back to Wisconsin in '99 Joe saw the need for connection back to the military community, so we joined the Marine Corps League. He joined the VFW. We also joined a group called the American GI Forum, which is a group of Hispanic veterans that started in WWII because of discrimination. Hispanics weren't given burial privileges, VA privileges, so that group started as a social awareness group. So, we joined that. And then we created the Latino Veterans Legacy of Valor Project through them. So, we became very, very active in military organizations once we moved back to Wisconsin.

24. On how she feels about her experience in the military, in the United States Marine Corps:

Today, I feel very, very proud. ... Right after we got out, I wasn't angry the way Joe was, I was just sad. I was sad that it didn't turn out the way I thought. Because I was then also proud to be a Marine, but Joe wanted to wipe it off the face of the earth. He didn't want to be called a Marine anymore. He was just—he was just too angry. And then when we moved back to Wisconsin and we saw the veteran community here was so vibrant, and active, and supportive, that I think he finally felt a place to be. And then that's when I understood the magnitude of serving with my spouse, that I never really understood before. When I was younger I just saw it as we both had a job as Marines. But it wasn't until later that I saw we served our country together as a couple. And that's very, very rare. And it was very, very special.

25. On what surprised her about her military experience, what she didn't expect, and what she realized:

... I had never had an actual job out of high school. What surprised me most being in the military was how much I realized I was an American. Because you're in the military and they're always saying we're doing this for country, God, country, corps, God, country, corps, it was constantly repeated over and over again. And I thought, I'm—this is for my country, this is for people I've never known, you know? My husband is deployed overseas for people he doesn't know in Kansas, or you know, Illinois and Wisconsin, he's out there for those people. So, I was really surprised at how patriotic I became. I didn't realize the love of country that I developed. I wish I would have understood more the magnitude of the importance of my actual work. Because I was in a training squadron I didn't deploy, I didn't go any place of danger, but I still had a very important role in the men and women that did go out. I just minimized what I did. It was like, oh, I just go to base and back. But now that I'm older, I see that there was an importance to what I did.

26. One how the experience of four years in the service impacted the path of her life and her character:

It made me more service-oriented. Every job I've had since, and every volunteer community thing I've done, is always to serve people. We've got to help. We've got to see our part in the community. And if they need help, we need to offer it in some way. And the Marine Corps has been just an indelible stamp on there. You know, order, rank, respect, honor, structure, all of that has fed into what we did ever since we served. We still use language. When we come home from vacation bible school, I told my husband one time, now we need an after-action report. And he's like, what? Well, let's debrief. And he's like, you mean talk about what happened, you know? I was like yes, yes, we've got to figure out what to do. But there's certain things that just don't leave you because they just were that important.