

FROM A CALLING ON THE SEA TO A CALLING IN THE CLASSROOM:

WISCONSIN'S WOMAN VETERAN OF THE YEAR SERVES
AS A ROLE MODEL FOR HER STUDENTS



Joanie Dickerson enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1980 as an “undesignated seaman,” meaning she wasn’t assigned to a specific career path. Eventually she found her niche, however, in finance. During her service, Joanie oversaw payroll and accounting and sailed the world.

After twenty years of proudly wearing the uniform, Joanie retired as a Chief Petty Officer. She left the military to spend some time with her boys – they were five and two years old at the time – and volunteer in her community, before starting her next mission: teaching.

“It was a natural fit because, in the Navy I was tasked with training new people in our career field. The last four years I was at the Naval Training Center where I was teaching sailors how to be able to go on a ship and be able to cover all aspects of our job. So, I had been working in the training and education field all along really.”

Joanie started out as a substitute before going back to school to earn her teaching degree. “When I had the opportunity to substitute teach, I just realized that was where I wanted to be,” she said. Now, she’s a full-time educator of first grade and fifth through eighth grade students at St. Mary’s School in Bloomington, where she also often has the opportunity to share her military background.

“We spend a lot of time here at our school talking about respect for veterans and identifying who has veterans in their family and what that means. So, our children are very knowledgeable about the sacrifices of those who have served. They get it. And when we have our Veterans Day program [pre-COVID], our veterans who attend form a receiving line and all the students go through and thank them individually. It’s a wonderful thing.”



2020 WOMAN VETERAN OF THE YEAR

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Joanie was recently named the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs 2020 Woman Veteran of the Year and was formally presented the award at her school by WDVA Secretary Mary Kolar. Created in 2009, the WDVA’s Woman Veteran of the Year Award recognizes women veterans in Wisconsin who have compiled records of exemplary service as military service members, veterans, and outstanding members of their communities.



In addition to sharing her Navy experience with her own students, Joanie has been a counselor for American Legion Auxiliary (ALA) Badger Girls State since her active duty days. During a Careers for Women event, she spoke with high school juniors about a career in the military.

“The most profound moment I ever had doing that is when a young woman looked at me and said, ‘We are the cream of the crop of our high school, why would we want to go into the military?’ I was so taken aback by the question, and yet it was a very valid question. And I said because, as a member of this country you owe your country your service, whether you go in the military or you serve locally in your community. One way or another, as a citizen of this nation, that is your obligation.”

Joanie, herself, has remained devoted to improving the lives of others. When she transitioned to civilian life, she used the leadership and training skills she developed in the military to effectively serve various organizations for the betterment of our veterans, youth, and community members. Joanie has held positions at American Legion Post 482 in Bagley as post commander, service officer, and finance officer. She has served as adjutant on the American Legion Grant County Council and, as a dual member of the American Legion family, she has also served as an officer and active member ALA Unit 482. She also served as a liaison to the county veterans service officer when the ALA established the state-wide Homeless Women Veterans Grant Fund, which helps women veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and currently serves on its review committee. At the state level, she has served as chairman of several American Legion ALA committees and has advanced through the ALA state officer positions, currently serving as the department president.

In addition to these Legion roles, Joanie transports veterans to medical appointments and is also an active advocate regarding issues impacting veterans, the military, and their families to ensure the issues impacting them remain in the forefront of the minds of our elected officials. She exemplifies what it means to be an outstanding community member and veteran.

Joanie’s advice for women who want to follow in her footsteps: “Take advantage of every opportunity you are ever given. There is a benefit to challenging yourself and stretching yourself. There’s so many things that are possible, if only you let yourself do it, take advantage of them.”

