

Good afternoon and welcome ladies and gentlemen, friends, families and my fellow veterans.

I first want to start off my speech by thanking several people:

I want to thank Kaitria Sievers and everyone at the Student Union Programming Board for inviting me to speak at today's event. I also want to thank you and those involved in this ceremony for upholding this time-honored tradition of laying the wreath beneath the Memorial Union Tower.

I want to thank Kathy Murray of Student Life for making Mizzou Veterans Week an annual success every year and all that you do for Mizzou Student Veterans.

To Carol Fleisher: you've been a mentor, a friend, and for me and most student veterans on campus, a mother as well.

To Chancellor Deaton, and those who've served on the Chancellors Task Force for a Veteran and Military-Friendly campus, your vision for making Mizzou not only 'Veteran-Friendly' but also making it the model for other institutions of higher education in helping assimilate veterans not only into the classroom, but also back into society as well.

In several very short weeks I will be finishing up my time here as a Mizzou student veteran. And as I've had time to reflect this past week about my journey over the last four-and-a-half years, I'd like to think that my transition to Mizzou wasn't that bad after all.

But then I'd look at my wonderful, beautiful wife who's in the crowd today, I would then recall the difficulty of the transition that I, and my family, actually encountered when I returned to the University of Missouri.

But first I must explain why I joined the military. Three reasons: to serve my country in a time of war, for the education benefits and finally, to see the world. After accomplishing these goals, I had a decision to make: stay in the military and continue my service on active duty or go finish my degree. I ultimately decided the latter.

So when I left active duty in August of 2007, I had exactly five days before class started to move myself, my wife, and my daughter from the protective and routine-oriented life of the military that I had grown accustomed to, to my new life as a college student in Columbia, Missouri where I didn't know a single person.

Yes, I took the steps necessary to enroll into my engineering program here at Mizzou, but I knew nothing about how to use my GI Bill. I knew I had to see an academic advisor, but I didn't tell him it had been years since I had seen a math problem. Instead, my advisor suggested that I take 17 hours of calculus, chemistry, physics, and engineering classes.

So I took his word for it, thinking at the time that if an 18 year old could handle this course load, I surely could. After all, I had been in the military and had endured much harder circumstances than a classroom could provide. After he signed me up for classes he asked me if I flew B-2 Bombers [because obviously everyone in the Air Force is a pilot]. I guess that should've been my first signal that I didn't have a clue of what I was getting into.

My first few weeks back to college were terrible. My first GI Bill check was late. I was having difficulty paying the bills. Adding to our stress, Alisha and I had switch daycares for our daughter three times in one month. The first day care we left because of inadequate care. The second randomly closed their doors one day and filed for bankruptcy. Oh and did I mention I was failing in class. My first math exam I received a 26%. Yes, things were not going well.

This led me to question my decision to leave the military. Leaving the mission and my fellow servicemembers behind was already something that I had felt guilty about. Because by the time I left the military, serving my country was no longer about receiving education benefits or traveling the world. Instead, it was about being a part of something much larger than me. It was about service to my country and serving next to my fellow brothers and sisters in arms.

Feeling a bit down at this point, I began to question what exactly was I doing to myself and what was I putting my family through? I didn't expect these difficulties. I didn't plan this and I definitely wasn't trained to handle these obstacles. I soon began to hate going to class and studying. And I especially was indifferent to my fellow classmates. Yes things were tough.

But then as luck would have it, things started to change. After visiting Carol at the admissions to get my GI Bill straightened out, she mentioned that other student veterans had formed a group on campus and was having an upcoming meeting and encouraged me to attend.

Interested in meeting a few people, I decided to attend. At this first meeting I met some fellow veterans who also happened to be engineering students. They told me of the similar difficulties they had faced both in transition and academically.

But they also gave me some great advice. They encouraged me to put down my pride and seek academic help for the classes I was performing poorly in. They also encouraged me to get involved with the group more often stating that the camaraderie of fellow veterans was the most important part of their transition process.

They also said that compared to things they had gone through, college was easy. What was the worse that they could do give you an F? "So what", they said, "You then just take the class over."

So, I took their advice and sought out academic assistance and also got involved with the student veteran group. And what found in this group, as I began to talk to many student veterans, were similar stories of the struggle to reintegrate and return to the classroom.

I then found some of my fellow veterans who didn't have the family support, like I did, and were dealing with issues like Traumatic Brain Injuries or Post Traumatic Stress, making the transition they were going through exponentially more difficult than mine.

At that point, I realized I probably didn't have it so bad after all. I decided to suck it up and push forward. Realize that I had made a commitment to finish my education and I was determined to see that goal through.

I also decided to dedicate my time to the service of helping other veterans return to Mizzou and get their education because they had earned the right, some probably more than more than I had.

And since that time in 2007, the Mizzou veteran population has grown tremendously. The support and services on campus as well as those within the Columbia community has grown as well. This is all due to the countless people who've decided that service to our returning veterans is not only what's important, but what is also morally right.

So today, on Veterans Day, originally designated Armistice Day on November 11, 1918, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, we gather here to recognize our Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines and Coast Guard veterans who have sacrificed, both in war and in peace, to protect America and the American way of life.

We are here to honor our brave men and women who have proudly served this great Nation, for they are the fabric from which our flag has been made.

But we as Veterans should also take the time to thank those around us who've served us. To all the friends and colleagues who've got us through our difficult times of transition.

We must also honor each other's families, who've sacrifice in their own, often uncelebrated ways. As long as we remain engaged in prolonged conflict, family support should always be recognized and honored for their accomplishments and sacrifices to our Nation.

And finally I want to past on some wisdom to my fellow student veterans. In service to each other, we've developed camaraderie and overcome feelings of isolation. In service to each other, we've rebuilt our sense of purpose through meaningful community engagement. In service to each other, we've help to draw the parallel between military service and community service.

So please, I implore you, don't stop serving one another here or after you leave Mizzou. We are the new "Greatest Generation." We have a responsibility to continue to serve each other and our nation as school teachers, scientists, engineers, lawyers and doctors, business leaders, and yes even as politicians.

This great country was built up on the back of our returning veterans. And it will be built back up and turned around by us again. You've learned from the world's best military. Don't let that go to waste. Get your education and continue to serve.

Also, remember the words of one military creed:

- I will always place the mission first.
- I will never accept defeat.
- I will never quit.
- I will never leave a fallen comrade.

America is fortunate to have you, and all veterans of conflicts past, who exemplify commitment to duty, willingly display valor under fire, and favor humility over glory. This notion of selflessness and sacrifice—the likes of which are exhibited each and every day by our military—is the bedrock of our all-volunteer force.

Today is a day OF Honor and a day TO Honor. Honor those who've served, are currently serving, and who've served you.

On this day of celebration and reflection, I thank everyone who has worn a U.S. military uniform for their honorable service and for our freedom.

Thank you and have a wonderful Veterans Day.