

Oral History Interview with Gerry Y. Braxter

Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Collection

I Am Not Invisible Project

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Narrator: Gerry Y. Braxter

Interviewer: Rachelle M. Halaska

Length of interview: 00:52:03

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Summary:

In this oral history interview Gerry Braxter discusses her service in the U.S. Army, with the 29th Supply and Service Company in Germany, and with the 15th Forward Support Battalion at Fort Hood, Texas, from 1992 to 1994. When Braxter was two-years old, she moved with her parents from Michigan to Louisiana. Braxter attended schools there and in Mississippi. Her parents divorced, and Braxter chronicles a childhood of trauma that led her at the age of thirteen to run away from her mother and an abusive stepfather. She found a temporary abode at her uncle's home, and then reunited with her father. The dying wish of an uncle that she "do something" with her life by going into the military as he had inspired her to seek to join the Army. Her first attempt to do so, in 1989, was curtailed upon the discovery of her pregnancy that later ended in miscarriage. In 1992, at age twenty-two, Braxter again attempted to join the Army, seeing it as an escape. Upon alighting from the bus for basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, Braxter entered upon an experience she felt unprepared for by a recruiter, who was simply fulfilling her wish to break from her past. She speaks of the close relationship she had with her father, who had not encouraged her to enlist. She tells of the drill instructor who confronted her and challenged her to prove herself, a challenge that comported with her desire to not be told, especially by males, that she couldn't do something. She trudged up Tank Hill and found live-fire "kind of scary," but found more congenial the gas chamber that never seemed to tax her. Of her graduation day, she recalls one family member in attendance. "Fort Leisure" a nickname applied by many veterans to Fort Lee, Virginia, was the site of Braxter's Advanced Individual Training. She explains why her time at Fort Lee left her, at graduation, in the best physical shape of her life. She states that her military occupational specialty at graduation was 92 Alpha. She touches upon her duties and her personal learning style. Braxter says that her "escape plan" included an assignment to Wiesbaden Air Base and the 29th Supply and Service Company. Considering it like a nine-to-five job, she was undeterred by the comment of her company commander about her pregnancy with her son. She recalls the routine of her duties and life there. Despite her enjoyment of being in Germany, Braxter keenly missed her family and subsequently extended a home visit by a week, thereby receiving a demotion. Braxter declares the time with family worth it. Ordered next to Fort Hood, Texas, Braxter and son left Germany two weeks after his birth. Of Fort Hood, she stated that it was "totally different" from overseas, with her company commander intoning, "You're in the real Army now!" She tells of the adjustments she had to make. Upon review, rated a poor performance, attributed to a weight gain that was later discovered to be a pregnancy, Braxter decided to leave the military in late 1994. She shares her reflection on having children and career choices. Prior to moving to Wisconsin in July of 2006, Braxter spent time in Louisiana, Florida and Tennessee before resettling in Louisiana. The 2005 hurricane season, with the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in rapid succession, impelled Braxter, who had grown up with hurricanes, to seek quieter climes for herself and her children. With twenty years spent in the fast-food industry and as a manager, she found a position in Waukesha, Wisconsin, with the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise. Her move north was unassisted, as she had not been informed of Veteran's Administration (VA) relocation benefits. A medical diagnosis in 2008 and the denial of her application for Social Security Disability led to her first knowledge of the VA. With a new diagnosis of congestive heart failure, in 2013 Braxter was on state assistance. A friend counseled her to get a service-connected disability, and her financial situation improved. She talks about the Intensive Therapy Program offered through the VA to help veterans obtain work. She entered the program in 2014. Upgrading her service-connected disability but dissatisfied with her progress, Braxter was desirous of owning a business. Despite the advice of her therapist, she settled on professional cooking as her goal. She speaks of what she found to be the benefits and drawbacks of the VA's Entrepreneurship Program and that a chance meeting in November of 2018 with a celebrated chef kept her in the program, and that he helped her with various certifications. Braxter credits contact with him and with an employee of Milwaukee's Center for Veterans Issues as leading to employment in a veteran employee-run restaurant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Braxter graduated at the head of her culinary arts class. Her food cart business, "A Tasty Bit of Heaven," awaits a truck. She is in the process of joining the American Federation of Culinary Arts. Braxter shares her assessment of military life. Disliking the flying to assignments, it made her avoid all future aviation, but she liked the opportunity to travel. She attributes the fortitude to face problems to her service. She extols the uniqueness of the veteran community and the lasting value of

friendships formed.

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TRANSCRIPT

HALASKA: Today is October 12, 2019. This is an interview with Gerry Yolanda Braxter who served with the United States Army with the 29th SNS in Germany and the 15th FSB in Fort Hood from 1992 to 1994. This interview is being conducted at the Milwaukee Central Public Library. The interviewer is Rachelle Halaska, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veteran Museum Oral History Program. Thank you for meeting with me today, Jerry.

BRAXTER: Thank you for having me. [Laughs]

HALASKA: So I just want to start off with when and where were you born?

BRAXTER: Detroit, Michigan, in 1970. I was the second of five children. My parents stayed there for two years, and then we moved back to where my parents were originally from in Louisiana. And I have one older brother and

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three younger siblings. I went to school in Covington, Louisiana, for a while, and I went to school in Mississippi. The reason I actually joined the military was because my uncle--I was helping take care of him while he was dying--asked me to do something with my life. I was thirteen years old. He had served in the Army, so he asked me to go into the military. So since he was in the Army, I chose the Army. I went to basic training at Fort Hood, Texas--excuse me.

HALASKA: No, it's okay. So I just wanted to kind of go back a little bit. And just tell me a little bit more about growing up in Louisiana at the time and kind of what your growing up was like.

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BRAXTER: My childhood wasn't the best of childhoods. I had a few traumas and issues that I had to deal with. So early on in my life, I learned that I had to take care of myself. At thirteen years old, I was a runaway. I ran away from home to escape abuse. And I ended up living with my father's family after that because my mom and my dad divorced when I was two. My mom remarried, and my stepfather was my abuser. So my mom chose to stay with him instead of leaving to protect me. And her reason for that was because my two younger siblings were his.

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And she didn't want them to grow up without their dad in their life, regardless of what he did to me. So I ran away from home, and my uncle took me in, and he became my savior. Well, that lasted for a little while because his wife didn't want him to be a part of the "mess" that my running away from home created. So he took me to my father, which was probably one of the best things that he could've ever done. I got to see a side of my dad that I didn't get to see as a little kid because my stepfather didn't want him in the picture. My dad was my hero. I was his princess. His nickname for me was "Baby Girl." And my grandfather on my dad's side spoiled me rotten.

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Whatever I wanted, I got, regardless of what my dad said. So my dad told my grandfather--well actually, my grandfather told my dad, "One day, you'll get to do the same thing." So in 1989, I got pregnant, and I ended up losing my child. It was a girl. And that was the day that my mom told me the reason she stayed with my stepdad. So the same day I lost my child, I found out that I wasn't important enough for my mom to protect, so that ended my relationship with my mother. And '89 was the first time that I tried to go into the military, but due to my pregnancy, I couldn't get in. That's actually how I found out about being pregnant. So in '92, I decided life wasn't what I wanted it to be.

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So I decided I'm going into the service; I'm going to escape. I'm going to run away from everybody. I'm not going to be around my family. I'm not going to--that was my escape to be away from the world, to be away from me. But it didn't happen that way because I couldn't leave me. I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. And at that time, I felt like I had everything in the world to smile for. So when I got off the bus, I'm looking around, I'm smiling. And the first thing the drill sergeant said to me is, "Why are you smiling?" Okay, "It's a beautiful place, I've never been outside of Louisiana before." So he says, "Drop and give me twenty." "Twenty what?" I didn't know at that time. "Give me twenty push-ups." "I can't do

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twenty push-ups; I don't know how to do a push-up."

HALASKA: Your recruiters didn't prepare you at all?

BRAXTER: Not really because they were trying to help me leave home, because my dad really didn't want me to go into the military. At that time, we were so close that my dad said he would blow up every plane, train, or anything that would take me away from him. Because I guess the fact that I had been out of his life for so long, and then finally to have me there was very important and special to him. At sixteen years old, my dad was still kissing me on the forehead and walking me to the bus stop. When I got home from high school, my dad was standing on the bus stop waiting for me. So kind of strange, you know, I'm sixteen years old, and my dad is still there.

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But it made me feel special. At least I knew he loved me, and that he cared. So when I did finally get in, I got to Fort Jackson. I couldn't pass the first test, so they sent me--I call it the fat farm--they sent me over there to teach me how to do push-ups and sit-ups and all that other stuff. Drill Sergeant Gathers was his name, he told me I wouldn't graduate, that I wouldn't make it. So I had to prove a point to him. I hate especially for males to tell me what I can and cannot do. So I made it through basic training. The day I graduated from basic training, I walked back over there to the first place that I went to, found Mr. Gathers, and told him I graduated. He told me, "I knew you would. I just felt like I had to do something to motivate you." And that

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motivated me to do what I had to do to graduate basic training. So I left South Carolina, and I went to Fort Lee.

HALASKA: In basic training, what kind of--so you arrived. What were the facilities like? Where did you stay?

BRAXTER: I was on Fort Jackson. What I remember about Fort Jackson is Tank Hill. I remember live fire.

HALASKA: Tell me about live fire.

BRAXTER: Kind of scary. And I also remember the gas chamber. I loved the gas chamber, which is kind of rare because a lot of people don't like it. But for me, it was fun watching the people come out with the little snotty noses and the coughing and flapping their hands and stuff around. So it was unique for me because it didn't bother me. I didn't get the little snotty nose, but

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I liked it. If I could go back and do that one again, I would. But with my health the way it is, I wouldn't be able to. And I say that because I have heart conditions and lung conditions, so the gas chamber would be out. I remember the day I graduated basic training because the same uncle that saved me when I ran away from home was the only family member that came to my graduation. We left, we went and had lunch, and he caught me up on what was going on with the family. He took pictures. Unfortunately, I don't have those pictures anymore because they got destroyed in

Hurricane Katrina, so the majority of my military stuff is gone.

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After Fort Jackson I went to Fort Lee. Most veterans or service members "quote" [??] refer to Fort Lee as "Fort Leisure" because it was in Virginia. And there, I was very competitive as well. I felt like I had to compete with the males, especially my drill sergeant. So I learned to lift weights. And the first couple times I lifted weights, my arms felt like jelly, my legs felt like jelly, because the more he lifted, the more I lifted. And being that he was a weightlifter, it was kind of like I was punishing myself. But I had managed to get up to lifting 450 pounds. I managed 700 pounds with my legs, just

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to compete with him. And his comments were "You can't do this because you're a woman," and "You can't do that because you're a woman," and so I told him by the time I got out of there, I was going to be lifting 500 pounds. Didn't quite make it that far, but.

HALASKA: What kind of lift?

BRAXTER: We did the--I'm not exactly sure what it's called, where you lay on your back, and you lift up, and you have a spotter.

HALASKA: Bench press?

BRAXTER: Yes.

HALASKA: Oh, okay.

BRAXTER: And then we did the ones with the legs on the machine. And sometimes we did the free weights where you squat and pick them up. I couldn't lift quite that much, but I did good. When I came home, I think I was in the best shape that I'd possibly ever been in my life. I enjoyed the competition. So

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when I went into basic training and my advanced individual training, my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] was a 76V, which was supply, mostly warehouse and I think motor pool. When I exited, it was a 92A, where they had combined all of the 76 series together. I left Fort Lee--

HALASKA: When--what was your training in supply like? What did they teach you there? What was classroom work like?

BRAXTER: It was pulling stuff off of shelves, referencing where to find things in the actual warehouse, operating a forklift, which was fun because I had never done that before, so that was new. I pretty much enjoyed learning

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because I learn best by hands-on. So actually working in the warehouse at that time was good.

HALASKA: Did they have like a training warehouse for you guys or what?

BRAXTER: I want to say yeah, but that's kind of fuzzy, and I don't really remember if I went to like a training place, or if I just went actually straight to where I was going to work. I know when I went to Germany, I actually went to work in the motor pool, so that was fun. Ordering the parts and referencing the different stuff that the people needed.

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So the best part about Germany was the four different seasons in one day. It would be sunny, then you would get the rain, then you'd get the cold, and then you'd get the heat, so I kind of enjoyed all of that. It was my first time ever being out of the country. I kind of missed my family, so when I went home, I took an extra week instead of coming back when I was supposed to, so I got in trouble. I got demoted, but it was well worth it. I got to see my dad, and my dad got to see me in my uniform. The only problem he had was, when I went into the military, I went in with long hair. When I went home to visit him, my hair was chopped off, and he wasn't too happy about that. Because my dad always loved women with long hair, and my mom had had long hair, so he wanted my hair to be long like hers. But I was happy it was chopped off.

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HALASKA: Why were you happy it was chopped off?

BRAXTER: Less work. Not have to worry about getting in trouble because your hair wasn't where it was supposed to be while you were in uniform. I didn't have to worry about trying to fit it underneath my hat. So that was a good thing for me, but it was a bad thing for my dad. So when I finally went back to Germany, I met some people and became friends. I got pregnant with my son in '93, and he was a preemie. He was actually born in a German hospital, not on post, and most of my care was off post. So the ultrasounds told me I was having a girl, so I'm prepared for a little girl. Well, lo and behold, when Michael was born, he was a boy. And they gave him to me, and I looked at the doctor and told him that that was not my kid.

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He said, "Why?" I said, "Because you told me I was having a girl. This is a boy." So they looked at me, and they told me--at that time, I still had my maiden name--private told me, "You're the only African American in this hospital. This is your son." So I looked at my son, and I said, "Well, you need a name," because I had a name for a girl, but not a boy. So I called home, told them I had a boy, but he had no name. So my dad and my grandmother came up with my son's name. And because I didn't want him to be named after me, I named him Michael Jared [??] Tony instead of Jerry. So he still has a variance of my name.

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So one of the ladies that I met while I was over her, her name was Nikki [??]. She became Michael's godmother, and she helped me learn what I needed to do with the baby because I didn't know. So two weeks after Michael was born, got his little passport and everything, and we came to the States. That's also when I got my orders to go to Fort Hood, which I found was totally different than being overseas, because overseas, when you go to the barracks--I mean when you go to the field, you go to another barracks. Well, when Fort Hood, they said, "You're going to the field," you're sleeping actually outside under the stars. No, no, no, no, didn't understand that. So my company commander, I think it was, said, "Oh, you're in the real Army now."

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So I had to understand that what I did over there was different than what I was going to do over here. I also had to adjust to having speed limits, because on the autobahn, there was no speed limit, so it was new. I got stopped on my first day at Fort Hood for speeding, and the officer knew that I had come from out of the country. He knew that I was over there by the autobahn because his comment was, "I'll let you go this time, but you need to realize we have speed limits, we have laws." And I laughed about it because I'm like okay, now I've got to get used to driving slow. So to this day, I still don't drive slow. I've

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had several speeding tickets since being out of the military because I'm driving fifteen to twenty miles over, instead of the regular speed limits. Fortunately enough, while my dad was alive, he took care of my speeding tickets for me, because most times I got them going to see him. So that's that. In '94, I found out that I was pregnant with my daughter, and that is how I ended up getting out of the military. At first, we just thought I was gaining weight, and

they called it poor performance.

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But I guess after I got ready to get out, that's when it showed up that I was actually pregnant. It took several tests because it kept coming back negative, but I was actually pregnant. So in December of '94, I opted to get out. And during the final ETS-ing [Expiration Term of Service], we found out that I was pregnant with my daughter. Again, another preemie. She was born on Fort Hood, Texas, which I really didn't like Fort Hood because of the heat. I didn't like Fort Hood because we had to go sleep outside with the bugs and the cows and a skunk. What was different about Fort Hood, though, was eating

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outside, having them bring the food out there for us to eat, and the different ways to bathe and clean yourself, which was very different. You couldn't just go in the next room and go into a shower.

HALASKA: What did you have to do?

BRAXTER: You used the water in your canteen and poured it in your Kevlar [??] and washed that way. And on the days that they let you go back in, you got to take a full shower that way. So the women got to take, I believe, more showers than the guys, which was nice. But today, if I knew back then what I know today, I think I would have stayed in the military. Even though having my kids, I would've stayed in. I would've been retired now, but I would've stayed in. Back then, I felt like my obligation was to my children. I felt like

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I needed to be a mom to them. To this day, my son loves telling people that he was born in Germany, just to see their reaction. And then he'll call me and say, "Well, mom, tell 'em, tell 'em, I was born overseas, I was born in Germany." And that excites him. I wish one day, I could take him back so he can see where he was born. But due to some troubles in my life, I can't take him.

HALASKA: Tell me a little bit more about Germany, about--so you had never been out the country before.

BRAXTER: No.

HALASKA: What were your thoughts about getting assigned to Germany?

BRAXTER: I was happy.

HALASKA: Okay. Why were you happy?

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BRAXTER: It was still part of my escape plan. At least I figured I can escape me a little bit more. I figured I would get lost, but it didn't happen that way. It was like a 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. job over there. You go in, you do your exercises, you do your shifts, you do whatever what you had to do for that day, and then you were off.

HALASKA: And what base were you at?

BRAXTER: 29th S&S [29th Supply and Service Company]--no, Wiesbaden Air Base, and the unit was 29th S&S.

HALASKA: And what does S&S stand for?

BRAXTER: I really don't remember.

HALASKA: [Laughs] That's okay.

BRAXTER: I know it's a supply unit.

HALASKA: Okay.

BRAXTER: Some of the stuff I remember, but then some of the stuff I don't remember about the military. I do remember when I got pregnant with my son, my company commander, which at that time I really didn't think

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nothing of it, said, "If the Army wanted you to have a kid, we would've issued you one." And it really didn't make sense to me at that time, but I'm like wow. I've completed basic training. I've completed AIT [Advanced Individual Training]. It's a regular life now after that, it's just like this is a job. And people have relationships and things happen, kids come along. Why was that an issue? So I let it go. I still had a beautiful little boy. When I was in Germany, I didn't do too much as far as traveling or whatever. I did go a couple places. But my thing was, I stayed in the barracks, and I cooked.

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Even in the military, cooking was a way of relief. We had fish fries on Friday. We had steak and shrimp and pork chops.

HALASKA: Did you have a kitchen in your barracks?

BRAXTER: No.

HALASKA: Where did you cook?

BRAXTER: In my room on a hotplate. Even though I didn't want to learn how to cook, it became a way of stress relief. It became a way to take my mind off different things that was going on. Cooking became a way for me to relax, so to cook and feed the people in the barracks was fun for me. We played spades, we played dominos, and those kinds of things. And those were on the

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nights that I cooked because there were multiple people coming in and out of the room.

HALASKA: That sounds like fun.

BRAXTER: I learned to eat Hawaiian pizzas in Germany, which became one of my favorites. One of the other things that became one of my favorites was mixing mayonnaise and ketchup together, or just dipping my french-fries in mayo.

HALASKA: Is that a German thing?

BRAXTER: Yes. When I was Germany, and you went to McDonald's or Burger King, ketchup was something that you really had to ask for. They didn't really do the ketchup and the fry thing, so you got mayonnaise. So when I--it just became something that I loved to do. And to this day, I still eat mayonnaise on my fries. I still mix the ketchup and the mayonnaise together. At my

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job, which is Troop Café, one of my coworkers thinks that is absolutely disgusting, but I enjoy it. When I got out of the military, I went back home to Louisiana. I stayed there for two years. Then I moved to Florida. I stayed there for

two years. I moved back to Louisiana. I visited Tennessee, Virginia, Texas again, then I went back to Louisiana, and I stayed in Louisiana until I moved to Wisconsin. I moved to Wisconsin in August of 2006, the year after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

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My kids had never been through a hurricane season, so they didn't know what it was like. For me, I grew up with hurricanes--nothing quite as bad. For me, hurricane season was like okay, yay, we're not going to school, a little bit of wind, a little bit of rain. But with Katrina and Rita, it was worse--the first hurricanes my kids had ever went through. And standing in line for three hours for food and water was something that I didn't want to go through again. I was the first person back in my neighborhood after Rita.

HALASKA: What neighborhood were you living in?

BRAXTER: I was living in Lake Charles, Louisiana at that time. I was working for Kentucky Fried Chicken again. I spent twenty years working for KFC. I started working for them when I was sixteen. I also worked for Popeye's and a

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whole bunch of different fast-food restaurants, but a total of twenty years for McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Those were my favorite two restaurants. I even worked at both of them at the same time a couple times. McDonald's in the morning as an opening manager, KFC at night as a closing manager, and still a single mom taking care of two kids. During the hurricane, like I said, my kids had never been through anything like that, and I didn't want them to go through it again, two hurricanes within a month. So I packed up my Mitsubishi Galant a year later when they said hurricane season of 2006 was supposed to be worse than 2005. I didn't think it could get much worse. So I went on MapQuest

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after calling Kentucky Fried Chicken in different states to figure out who was looking for a manager. And the one on Sunset Avenue in Waukesha was looking for a manager. They hired me. So everything that could fit in the Mitsubishi Galant and some directions off of MapQuest is how I got here.

HALASKA: With your children in the car?

BRAXTER: With my children, me and the kids were in the front seat, a lot of our stuff was in the back seat, and what could fit in the trunk, and \$2,500. I didn't know at that time about the VA and about them helping veterans relocate. I didn't know about that at all. So I took my savings, and I got here on my own. So I'm working--this is now 2006--I'm working for KFC in the morning---no, I'm working for McDonald's in the morning and KFC at

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night. The kids go to work with me at McDonald's until it's time for them to go to school. They catch the bus, they go to school, my sister-in-law picks them up. When I get off work at KFC at eleven o'clock at night, I go pick the kids up, and I go home. So around 2008, I get sick, I'm diagnosed with cardiomyopathy and high blood pressure, some other issues, and it's to the point where I can't work. So I go and apply for Social Security disability, and the judge tells me, "No, you are a veteran, let the VA hospital take care of you."

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So that's the first I heard about the VA. So where's the VA, what is the VA, and what can they do for me? So he gives me the address, he tells me where to go, and I go. I don't continue going, I feel like there's nothing they can do for me. I feel like I've worked all of this time, Social Security turned me down, and these people aren't going to help me either. So 2013, August, I go to the VA, I go to the domiciliary, and I meet this veteran named Larry Allen. At that time, I'm suicidal, have no will to live, don't want to be here, I'm in a lot of pain. I had new diagnoses. I was diagnosed then

with congestive heart

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failure. So I got my kids. Nobody is going to help me, I can't work. My friend, Randy Studeman is taking care of me and my children because I'm not working. I'm on state assistance, barely making it by, and Larry tells me to go to regional to get service connected. Well what the heck is service connection? What is this? So he walks me through everything that I need to go through. I found out that what I didn't think was part of my military service was actually part of my military service.

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So I was actually service connected for some of my health issues. And I thanked Larry, and then I started having an income again. So I felt a sense of independence, I got a check, I could take care of me and my kids. And I felt like had I know about the VA when I got out, that I would have been probably in a healthier place because I would've been able to take care of myself. My health probably wouldn't have been as bad, or today I feel like it wouldn't be where it is now. So 2013, I get an income. 2014, I find out about this program through the VA where they help veterans get a job. It was called the IT

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program, Intensive Therapy. It wasn't--because I had become antisocial and not hanging out with people, or leaving my house, or doing anything that involved other people, this program gave me an opportunity to sit at a desk, have a sense of independence again because I had a job. It wasn't like a real job, but it was a job, so I did that for a little while. And then I went to another part of the hospital to work, which was the DAV [Disabled American Veterans] Transportation office, which was fun. There, I helped coordinate rides for the veterans to get back-and-forth to their appointments.

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Did that for a little while, probably about two years. So I'm still getting fifty percent service connection, so I was told by Larry again, "You need to go and see if you can upgrade your service connection." So I did, eventually got it upgraded. Not happy with what I'm doing, health is getting worse, so I'm not working anymore. I finally decided that I wanted to get back into the real world of work. Still had my goals of wanting to own my own business, and I felt like I could own my own business with my health issues, I could set my hours and work and do what needs to be done. So that way, I could still take care of myself, I could still work, and whenever my thoughts were racing, I can cook.

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But my first initial business that I wanted was--I was living in Waukesha--there was no place to buy haircare products for African Americans.

HALASKA: In Waukesha?

BRAXTER: In Waukesha. You had to actually come all the way to Milwaukee. So my goal was--and I'm still in the intensive therapy program--my goal was to own my own business, which would've been an African haircare product store. But that didn't really sit real well with me. I wanted to cook. A long time, I had always wanted my own restaurant. I'm running somebody else's restaurant, why can't I run my own? But my therapist at that time said no because I have an eating disorder--"Okay, you have an eating disorder, how are you going to run a restaurant? When you get upset, you eat, when you get depressed, you eat, when you're happy, you eat." True.

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But a lot of professional chefs, especially--and some of the ones that are on TV have eating disorders, and you wouldn't know it unless you read their biographies or stuff like that. When I cook, I don't eat nearly as much or as

often as I do when I'm not cooking because the smells of the food and all of that, and then a little taste here to make sure it's seasoned the right way, you don't want to eat. So I changed my mind and went back to wanting to own a restaurant. Well, the thing with owning a restaurant is location, location, location, and if it's not in the right location, your restaurant will close. If you don't have proper parking space or the right staff, overhead costs too much, your restaurant can fail. So I'm thinking I can still cook, only we

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change it to only a food truck. Less overhead, less employees. If the business is not working in this spot, you can relocate to another spot, and your business will still work. So the VA had this program called Entrepreneurship program. It was a ten-week course, so I signed up for it. You go through this class for ten weeks, different speakers come in, and they tell you what you need to do to own a business and how to write a business plan. But the one thing that that program promised was, after you got through with the class, you'd have a business plan, and you can start a business. Wrong answer.

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You may have a business plan, but they neglect to tell you some of the things that you need to actually have. For me, a business truck, I needed certain licenses, I needed certain permits, but they don't tell you that in that class. So I was discouraged and ready to quit. In November of last year, I met Derek Smalls. He was teaching a class at Vets Manor on Wisconsin Avenue in Milwaukee. And I was supposed to be meeting my instructor for my final class on my business plan. So he was sitting in there rocking in his chair, and he had some stuff on the board about helping you get your ServSafe certificate, your food handlers certificate, so I started talking to him. "I can help you do this, I can help you do that." Well, with my bad experience with the entrepreneurship program, in my mind I'm like he's just tooting his own horn, this man can't help me do anything. Well, a year later, I am ServSafe certified at a management

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level. I am food-handler certified. I graduated top in my class for the Culinary Arts class offered by CVI [Center for Veterans Issues] in Troop Café. I am a DAV member. I am in the process of becoming an American Federal Culinary Arts member through--and I think that's the right term--through Derek. I've joined LinkedIn, which is a Facebook for business owners. I have my own business. The only problem right now is, I don't have the truck for the business.

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But I have my employee ID number for my food truck. My food truck is named A Tasty Bite of Heaven. I work at Troop Café from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. My foods are featured on Wednesdays, so some of the stuff that you'll get on my truck, you can actually come to Troop Café and get it there. I specialize in Cajun, Creole, and southern foods. And cooking still remains a way to help me relax and stay calm. And seeing the people's faces when they come into Troop, or having them come back on the next Wednesday to get something else that's different makes me feel good because I've made somebody else smile through something that I love.

HALASKA: That's wonderful.

BRAXTER: So that's me in a nutshell. [Laughs]

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HALASKA: I just want to ask some follow-up questions for a few--just a few things. So when you were getting out of the military, and you said that you wanted to get out because you wanted to spend more time with your children and parent them, did the--anyone tell you about any of the--like was there any family care things at Fort Hood?

BRAXTER: I don't know, I didn't ask. I felt like my responsibility was to my children and no longer to the military. I wanted to give my kids something that I didn't have. I wanted to be a better parent than my mom, so my goal and my focus was my kids.

HALASKA: Okay. And then looking back at those years in the military,

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how did they shape or influence kind of where you've gone since then?

BRAXTER: Well, it helped me travel a lot. It helped me realize that no matter what you go through, you cannot run from yourself, that staying and facing your issues and dealing with them is a lot better than trying to escape. Because in the long run, you are who you are, and no matter where you go in the world, your problems are going with you. So I've learned that, especially now that I'm out, that some of the friendships you make in the military are long-lasting. And the veteran community within itself is like no other when it

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comes to standing by each other and being friends. Like I said, I met Mr. Smalls last year, and he has been the most positive influence as far as helping me with my business, as far as pointing me in the direction of people that I need to meet and talk to. He's a Navy veteran himself, so he understands the issues that veterans have. As part of his class, he helps you work on what can stop you from getting a job, as well as stop you from keeping the job. Which when I graduated from the Culinary Arts program, I volunteered for a couple months because I wanted to work with Mr. Smalls. I wanted him to be my mentor. To this

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day, he is still my mentor, and I work for him at Troop Café. I guess you still have that bond with fellow veterans that is like no other.

HALASKA: Okay. Is there--well, I guess was there anything about your military experience that surprised you, that you weren't expecting?

BRAXTER: Yes, flying on a plane. I got sick going on the plane to Germany, and I realized that I don't like to fly.

HALASKA: You realized this on the plane or right before?

BRAXTER: No, I realized this walking up to the plane when I passed out. I also realized that flying was not for me when I came back from Germany with my son. He was two weeks old. Nobody ever told me you don't feed a baby on a

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plane. So the man that was sitting on side of us got a bath that he probably wasn't expecting. My child threw up on him, but he was very patient and understanding about me being a new mom and not knowing. You know, the baby was hungry. So I figured, you know, you put the bottle in his mouth, you shut him up. Nobody on the plan will get mad at you. Well, and I have not flown since I've been out of the military, will not get on a plane. You cannot pay me to get on a plane.

HALASKA: Just drive places.

BRAXTER: Yes. Regardless of how long it takes to get there, yes, I drive. To go back home to Louisiana is seventeen hours I take the two days to

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drive those seventeen hours.

HALASKA: Is it a nice drive?

BRAXTER: Yes, it's beautiful, as long as you don't go through Chicago during rush hour traffic. So basically, most of my driving for my trips when I moved and everything was at nighttime, because the kids were asleep, you didn't have bathroom breaks, and you had less time to stop and feed them. Plus I learned, when you drive, you keep snacks in the car in a cooler, you keep drinks in the car in the cooler. You limit what you give the kids, but you keep them in there so that way, you can drive straight through and not have to pull over because you're hungry. You just reach in the cooler here and take this, and you're good. So yeah.

HALASKA: Is there anything else that you wanted to say about your service or your time in Germany or your experience as a veteran?

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BRAXTER: I will say this about the Center for Veterans Issues--that is a nonprofit that I work for. That's the nonprofit that owns Troop Café, so I work directly for them. They are very helpful with some of the programs that they have as far as helping with housing, mental health, and other issues that you may have. I met two people that actually work for CVI, and one of them is Miss Charlotte. I think her last name is Saien, S-A-I-E-N. And when I met this lady, I had applied at Troop Café for a job. When she hired me, and we got

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to start talking to each other on a regular basis, she's a woman to be admired. She's not a veteran, but she goes above and beyond for veterans. She is so easy to talk to. She uplifts your spirits when they're down. Because of some of my medical issues, I miss work, and she's so encouraging. She'll call and check up to see how I'm doing. She encourages me with my food truck. So there's her, and then there's the lieutenant. He's the CEO of Troop Café. He's also a veteran.

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They're very approachable people as far as being able to talk to them. I tend to let my pride get in the way when it comes to asking for help because I feel like I've had to support myself for so much on my own and do things on my own, that I don't really ask for help. But they make it easy for you to go to and ask them for help. And here recently, I needed help, and they gave me the help that I needed. They didn't throw it back in my face that I had to ask for help, and they continue to check on me to make sure I'm okay. So if ever you need help, you might not find them two, but you can find somebody like them that works at CVI.

HALASKA: Okay. Is there anything else that you want to add to your interview?

BRAXTER: No.

HALASKA: All right, well thank you very much.

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BRAXTER: You're very welcome.