



# Celebrating 50 years of NU Trailblazers!

JANUARY 13, 2024

NU WKG, ISSUE #14

## Finding Her Voice: June Donahue '81



June Donahue and her twin sister Jane, enrolled at Norwich because it was close to their hometown of Graniteville, VT. "I was painfully shy," says June. "Jane was being asked out on dates and I spent the first year thinking I wasn't going to be asked out because I had a perm. Then I realized it was because I didn't talk to anyone." Living on the Montpelier campus and taking classes in Northfield, it took a while for June to venture out of her shell. Her first endeavor was running for—and being elected—Class Vice-President. Eventually, she joined the chorus, Pegasus Players, and became a cheerleader. "That really helped with my self-confidence and willingness to put myself out there."



Following graduation with a BS in psychology, June returned to Norwich as the assistant director of admissions and then as director of student activities. It was while working at Norwich that June met Mike Heston, a Vermont State Police Officer. Mike enlisted in the US Marine Corps and later became an officer in the Vermont Army National Guard. They were married in 1988 and their wedding reception was the first one held in the Milano Ballroom in new Crawford Hall.

Over his 34-year military career, Mike commanded at all levels and in 2014 was promoted to Brigadier General in the Vermont Army National Guard. Mike deployed to Afghanistan in 2003, 2006, and 2011. It was on his second deployment that he told June about the burn pits where everything from garbage, human and medical waste, plastics, batteries and weaponry was torched with jet fuel. By Mike's second deployment, toxic exposure to burn pits was gaining recognition as a health hazard. In 2014 the Burn Pit Registry was established. "Mike always said you only create a registry when you know there is a problem," June said.

Two years after his final deployment, Mike began having extreme back pain followed by significant weight loss. After ten months and approximately 30 visits to numerous doctors, Mike and June went to the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. There Mike was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer due to exposure to toxins from burn pits. BG Michael Heston passed away on November 14, 2018.

June has devoted her life and career to serving others as an advocate for the less fortunate. She earned a master's degree in leadership & non-profit management from St. Michael's College in 2003. She had been the CEO of Vermont's Chapter of the Make-A-Wish Foundation and CEO of the Vermont Family Network. She also served as the Executive Director of The Chill Foundation, Burton Snowboards' non-profit that supports underserved youth. In her anger and grief, June focused her energy on advocating for burn pit legislation. "In this country we have OSHA regulations against burning toxic materials and yet the rules don't apply to our military overseas," June said.

In 2018, the Department of Veterans Affairs was denying close to 80% of burn pit-related claims because of a lack of evidence linking their conditions with exposures. In 2019, June's powerful testimony before the Vermont Senate Committee on Government Operations resulted in state legislation to raise awareness for doctors and soldiers about the symptoms and illnesses associated with exposure to burn pits.

June then engaged on the national level through TAPS (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors). June traveled to Washington DC as part of the TEAM Coalition to support the passing of legislation to expand VA health care and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. After a great deal of hard work, the PACT Act was signed into law by President Biden on August 10, 2022. June was in attendance for the White House ceremony. The new law allows veterans to get free medical care and expanded benefits for the numerous illnesses and cancers linked to burn pits and other toxic exposures.

"It's overwhelming," said June. "Mike was not the first and unfortunately, he will not be the last to die from the burn pits, but it does change things for so many others."

Norwich salutes graduates like June (Donahue) Heston '81 for fighting for necessary change to benefit many.

*For information on The PACT Act and Veterans' benefits related to toxic exposure, visit <https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/>*

*Records documenting women's history and experience at Norwich are available through the University Archives. <https://archives.norwich.edu/>*

In 1972, Vermont College merged with Norwich University. 2024 marks the **50th anniversary** of the first women to live on the Northfield campus and the first to join the NU Corps of Cadets—two years prior to the US Service Academies!

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### **Share your Norwich experience in the Women Kicking Glass Oral History Project!**

Call 1-866-456-1993 or email [customerservice@publishingconcepts.com](mailto:customerservice@publishingconcepts.com) for a personalized link to share your story and photos.

**The deadline for contributions is January 19, 2024.**