



The Van of Valor Chronicles Stories of Sacrifice in South Carolina

With back-scene interview w/ Harvard student

Dr. Kevin P. Wallace
Van of Valor

SUMMERVILLE, S.C. – The Van of Valor, a mobile journalism project dedicated to preserving the stories of Purple Heart recipients and Gold Star families, recently rolled into South Carolina on its nationwide journey.

Co-founder Lauren Wallace, a Harvard History Graduate Student and practicing Anthropologist, alongside her husband, Dr. Kevin P. Wallace, spent two emotionally charged days documenting the experiences of veterans in the Charleston area.

They found a quiet respite and hospitality at Kevin's brother's home in Summerville.

The Van of Valor is the brainchild of Lauren and Kevin Wallace. Kevin, being a retired combat photojournalist who earned a Bronze Star with Valor and Purple Heart, among many awards, in his career, was Inspired by a post-9/11 veteran's promise to ensure the sacrifices of military service are never forgotten.

The couple converted a used FedEx van into their mobile studio. Their mission is to travel across the country, collecting and sharing stories to foster a deeper connection and understanding between the military community and the civilian population.

A Purple Heart Recipient's Perspective

During their time in Summerville, the team conducted a powerful interview with Ocie Gay, an Army Purple Heart recipient from the Iraq War.

In a quiet, intimate setting, Gay shared his story, a narrative of service, sacrifice, and survival that so many veterans carry. The interview is a testament to the Van of Valor's mission: giving a platform to those whose stories might otherwise go unheard.

The project isn't just about chronicling combat stories; it is about capturing the full human experience of military service. These recorded conversations aim to create a permanent oral history, a resource that can inform and educate future generations about the profound cost of freedom.

A Quiet Hero, a Somber Revelation

The journey also included an interview with another Army veteran, a Green Beret who chose to remain anonymous.

The decision to forgo public identification speaks to the nature of their service, a life of silent sacrifice often hidden from the public eye.

The conversation offered a rare glimpse into a world of quiet fortitude, and the unexamined burdens carried by those in the special operations community.

These interviews highlight the diversity of military experience and the different ways service members carry their past. From the public acknowledgment of a Purple Heart to the private dignity of a Green Beret, the Van of Valor honors all who have served.

The Hidden Toll of Empathy

While the interviews were successful, they weren't without their emotional weight. Lauren found herself particularly affected by the looming interviews with two Gold Star families—a designation for those who have lost a family

member in the line of duty. The emotional toll began to mount as she prepared to engage with their profound grief and loss.

“Our work is not a detached, journalistic exercise,” said Lauren. “It is a deeply personal endeavor built on empathy and connection. I’m often called, ‘a very tough girl,’ so I see my own emotional response as a powerful reminder of the human cost behind the mission.”

Documenting these stories requires a willingness to bear witness to immense pain, and the Van of Valor team approaches this with a profound sense of responsibility.

“My husband has issues from war himself, so this work could become a complicated rollercoaster of emotions if either of us let our guard down, so we try to find peace in nature, wildlife and sometimes people,” said Lauren.

Finding Peace in the Lowcountry

Between interviews, the team enjoyed the serene beauty of the region. They explored the vibrant streets of downtown Charleston, savoring the charm of the historic city.

After their work in South Carolina was complete, they embarked on a scenic drive along the backroads to Savannah, Georgia. This travel provided a brief but necessary respite, a chance to process the weight of the stories they had heard amidst the beauty of the coastal landscape.

“The balance between the emotionally heavy interviews and the peaceful travel is a defining characteristic of the Van of Valor's journey,” said Lauren. “It reflects the resilience of the human spirit—the ability to find moments of peace and beauty even when carrying the burdens of others' pain.”

Looking Forward

The Van of Valor continues its mission, fueled by the stories of courage and sacrifice they collect along the way. The interviews conducted in South Carolina will become part of a larger tapestry of narratives, ensuring that the legacies of veterans and Gold Star families are preserved for years to come.

The project not only honors those who have served but also provides a path for healing and connection. By bringing these stories into the public sphere, the Van of Valor works to bridge the divide between military and civilian life, reminding all Americans of the valor and sacrifice that shape our nation's history.