

HELEN SAJER

2019 GFWC Pennsylvania Woman of the Year

Helen Sajer is the President and founder of Pennsylvania Wounded Warriors, Inc., an all-volunteer, Pennsylvania nonprofit corporation formed to assist wounded and disabled veterans of the Commonwealth to recover physically, mentally, and emotionally. Helen founded PAWW in 2007 after one of her sons, a United States Army Reserve officer, returned safely from deployment to Fallujah, Iraq. She made it her mission to ensure that every returning Pennsylvania veteran knows that the community cares and has a place to turn for assistance in readjusting to a changed life. Helen Sajer is committed to the belief that one person can make a difference in the lives of others.

Helen was born in Wilkes-Barre, PA and attended Coughlin High School. She graduated from the Mercy Hospital School of Nursing in Wilkes-Barre IN 1955 and began her practice as a registered nurse. In 1956, Helen married Gerald T. Sajer, an Army officer who left active service after the Korean conflict to complete his education. Helen later became the mother of six and grandmother of 15.

While her husband was a student at Harvard Law School, Helen served as the secretary of the Harvard Law Wives from 1957-59. When her husband started his law practice in central Pennsylvania, Helen not only raised their six children in Camp Hill, PA, but continued to be a contributor to the community. She was active in local politics, serving as the Democratic Committeewoman at the Camp Hill Precinct from 1974-85. She canvassed door-to-door to educate voters and registered 187 new voters, many of whom were college students. She stayed in touch with these students to ensure that they received absentee ballots and information about candidates. As a former member of the Camp Hill Junior Civic Club and Woman's Club, Helen contributed her time, energy and fundraising skills to the betterment of the borough. [NOTE: Back in the day, you may remember that women had to leave the junior woman's club at age 40.] Helen was also an active supporter of the Camp Hill High School where her children attended, as well as other organizations.

Upon her husband's appointment as the Adjutant General for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1987, Helen elevated her community-building to the state and national levels. Helen and her husband established the nation's first Family Support Program for the Pennsylvania National Guard to support the families of National Guard soldiers and airmen as their deployments in Iraq increased and extended. Helen also established and operated an annual youth camp at Fort Indiantown Gap for the children of National Guard soldiers, serving for six years as the camp nurse. This program served as a model for many other states. Helen also undertook major organizing and fundraising activities for Sergeant's Grove and Keystone Lodge at Fort Indiantown Gap, a meeting and recreation site dedicated as a living memorial to those who have served in the Pennsylvania National Guard.

As I said earlier, PAWW was established in 2007. Helen first conceived of the PAWW when she and her husband regularly visited and took a variety of donated items to Pennsylvania wounded warriors recovering at the Walter Reed/Bethesda military hospitals in Washington, D.C. and organized donations of activities, goods and services to wounded warriors. She gained

community support and donations to get wounded warriors and their families away from the hospital environment for activities ranging from hunting and fishing trips with donated gear to family trips to parks, ski resorts, and spectator events and funded incidental costs such as lodging and handicapped buses for such events so that the wounded warriors had no out-of-pocket expenses.

As wounded warriors have come home and resettled in the Commonwealth, PAWW has risen to new challenges. For example, veterans housing programs have assisted wounded warriors to acquire decent housing, but did not fund the cost of the security deposit. PAWW stepped in to fund that cost. PAWW has also become an entry point for veterans to access an array of community services. PAWW facilitates coordination between veterans and other community groups such as those seeking to donate specialized equipment and services to disabled veterans or to provide service dogs and train veterans to use them.

PAWW is a state-wide, independent, all volunteer 501(c)3 corporation and volunteers work out of their homes. What really impressed me is that the organization spends 95 cents of every dollar directly helping servicemen and women with everyday living expenses, and the remaining 5 cents on paper and postage.

In recognition of her service to the Commonwealth, the Pennsylvania National Guard, and her community, Helen has received numerous awards. Due to time constraints, I won't list them all, but trust me, she's been recognized, including being inducted into Military and Veterans Affairs Hall of Fame in 2018, the highest honor bestowed by this agency and reserved for those who have demonstrated the highest commitment to our Commonwealth and country.

Shortly, before General Sajer passed away, he asked Helen if she was going to march on with Pennsylvania Wounded Warriors, Inc. She responded, "I'm sure of it." And march on with it she certainly has. Her grassroots, all volunteer organization continues to grow. Over one million dollars is given out annually to needy veterans and their families.

Helen has certainly done all in her power and more to carry out her mission "to ensure that every returning Pennsylvania veteran knows that the community cares and has a place to turn to for assistance in readjusting to a changed life." A colleague once said, "Once she sets her mind on doing something, she's going to stay with it until she gets it finished."

Ladies [and gentlemen], may I present Helen Sajer, the 2019 GFWC Pennsylvania Woman of the Year.