

The Big Easy?

Connect with Shannah Sheffield

Surprisingly (maybe not to you, but to me), I have had difficulty getting “willing victims” for my Getting-To-Know-You posts. So, I began our interview with a hefty, “Thank you to Shannah!” Cute gal replied that she is “honored” to be selected & has been looking forward to it. She has lived a lot of life, so keep your legs & hands in the cart & enjoy the ride.

Shannah was 4th in a line of five children born a year apart to a very young mother in Marrero, Louisiana, near New Orleans. New Orleans is called “The Big Easy”. Somehow Shannah thought it applied to all things in life. Mom, who knew otherwise, decided to move all of these young children to Los Angeles. There, Mom quickly discovered that she (in Shannah’s words) “couldn’t handle it”. So Shannah, the youngest daughter, was taken back to Louisiana to be raised by her grandmother, Mama Nola, from age 3 until she was in the 6th grade. At that point, Shannah & Mama Nola rejoined Shannah’s mom & siblings in LA.

Although the family lived in central LA, they were bussed (by choice for a better education) to school in

the Valley. They rose at 5:30 AM to catch public transportation to then catch a school bus to finally arrive at school an hour & 20 minutes later. Hearing this, I commented on what an adjustment moving back in with the family must have been. Shannah replied, “No. Kids are resilient. I think it is when we give kids too many choices the problems happen!” My grandmother was a disciplinarian. “She didn’t give us choices. We were told what to do. We said, “Yes, Ma’am” & we did it. Unlike some generations, Mama Nola didn’t care about “feelings”. If we cried, she’d say, “Oh, you’re crying. If you start crying money, then you come & get me.” They lived paycheck to paycheck, welfare check to food stamps & were grateful to have these things. They were grateful to have someone care for them. Mama Nola was stern, but she imparted valuable life lessons. “Be productive”, she emphasized. “It doesn’t matter what you have, you can still be a productive person. Treat people the way you want to be treated. Read. Learn. Read the bible. Don’t be a follower. Rather make your own way. Think for yourself.” Shannah said fondly, “Those are the things I live by.”

At this point, Shannah paused, reflected & chuckled. “In fact, growing up with Mama Nola made the military

seem easy. Getting up early wasn't a problem. Being told what to do wasn't a problem. I joined, looked around & wondered, "Why are all these people complaining? This is easy." (*Easy? Well, I'll let you the readers be the judge.*)

Shannah was in the military from January 1989-January 2012, 23 years. She said joining was easy. Her brother knew somebody...yada yada...she was in. As a Sargent Major, she was stationed at multiple US Forts to include California, Washington & Georgia. Because that was easy, when she got out, she joined the Louisiana National Guard, reserves. As a Sergeant, First Class, she was initially a medic & then advanced to Respiratory Therapist. She worked in a MASH unit, a CASH unit, a hospital & in field units. It was in this role that she was deployed to Iraq in 2003, where she was put in charge of a Medical Clinic in an aviation unit, Black Hawk Brigade. There over a year, she worked with a surgeon, orthopedic PA, dentist & eight soldiers. There, rockets hit the base regularly & randomly. "When you hear a rocket pass the building", Shannah shared, "it is a noise that cannot be duplicated & it is a sound you never forget. Everyone stops, takes a deep breath & waits for the boom." (*Sound "easy" to you?*)

Once home, Shannah ended her National Guard Reserve status by becoming active-duty National Guard to head into her 2nd deployment in Iraq in 2010. This time, she ran an Entry Control Point – screening all who attempted to enter the base, certifying & issuing badges to those eligible. On this base, the cooks were from Nepal. Sierra Leone provided tower guards. Italians ran VIP helicopter missions. Pakistanis drove the buses. Many nationalities were entering & leaving the base at all times. This required diligence, focus & attention to detail. She was the final checker of many in a half-mile long entry point. They called her “The Badge Lady”. She was there 12 months. Her son, Kaden, was three months old when she left for this duty & an active toddler when she returned. (*Easy, right?*)

Back home, Shannah was ready to be done. She began the steps to put in her retirement papers. In the retirement briefing, she saw a friend, also retiring, who was about to start a contractor job in Afghanistan. He could hire whomever he wanted, so naturally invited Shannah to join him. As she hesitated, he assured her that if she went & didn’t like it, she could return. Although she was retiring, she had five months of leave left in her service. Did she take a vacation? No.

She, still technically in the military, went as a civilian to work with a military unit in Afghanistan. It was “an easy job”, she said. She used GPS devices to track Afghani trucks hired to deliver supplies to many military bases. The Sargent Major of that operation happened to be from Palatka. She went over there in November & was home by March. This was the final five months of her military career (on leave) spent working in Afghanistan, as a civilian. (*Easy.*)

Shannah’s beloved Mama Nola passed away about this time & Shannah knew it was time to stay retired & spend time with her five children. After a stay in Michigan (too cold) & a stay in Gainesville (too pricey), she remembered that Sargent Major & the name: Palatka (just right). In 2021, she bought the cute yellow house on the river in Palatka & moved in. Looking for things to do, she found free art classes at The First Presbyterian Church, taught by a then Pilot member, Michelle. There she also met Shirley & other Pilot Members. She wanted to be a part of a service organization, to be out in the community & liked the Pilot Mission. She joined. Now THAT was easy.

As with other interviews, I asked Shannah what she has “left she hopes to do”. This question is often

answered with such hopes as expansive travel itineraries. But unexpectedly, Shannah turned to personal improvement goals as the answer. “I am a procrastinator. But if others rely upon me, I show up. Procrastination is not an option.” She continued to confess she has a fear of public speaking she vows to overcome. To do this, she must be “in an up-front position leading the way”. Being in Pilot Club, & being in line to be president, blazes this path to personal improvement. She says she knows the Lord has given her what she needs to serve. She trusts in that & trusts the Lord will “put me where I need to be.” And I trust that no matter what or where that is, Shannah will find it “easy”. I have a framed pic in my office of a man standing on a very long road heading into nothing but trees & sky. The caption reads: “Life expands & contracts in direct proportion to one’s courage”. After spending an hour listening & being amazed, I believe that is Shannah’s life motto.

Shannah is married to her 3rd husband, Allen, who she met in a club on Bourbon Street. They fell hard for each other & he married her despite her reminders, “You know I have five kids, don’t you?” Due to lack of space in this post, I invite you to get those stories on your own! Or...I could do a 2nd episode.

Some special thanks need to be mentioned here to Shannah's mother, Brenda Johnson. She was entrusted with the care of Shannah's children throughout her deployments. She lives with & helps Shannah now & she has been an eager, helpful, happy helper at many Pilot Events.