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**NEWS ARTICLES**

# Miss Utah Credits Military Service With Her Civilian Success

By Jamie Findlater  
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WASHINGTON, May 5, 2008 – As the reigning Miss Utah and as a combat medic who has deployed to Afghanistan with her National Guard unit, Sgt. Jill Stevens said her experiences as a soldier have helped her in her civilian life.

In an interview on the “ASY Live” program on BlogTalkRadio.com, Stevens said her experience from November 2003 to April 2005 taking care of up to 40 patients on any given day at the Bagram Air Base medical aid station gave her the determination and adaptability that are paramount to her success in other aspects of her life.

"Being a soldier, you are really trained to adapt to any situation," she said, "and it has really prepared me for civilian life."

Stevens, who serves in the Utah National Guard's 1st Battalion, 211th Aviation Regiment, joined the National Guard in 2001. She said her military life and her civilian life aren't as different as some people might think.

"A lot of people think these paths are so different and that I live a dichotomy, but there's a reason I am involved in both organizations," she said. "Both the military and the Miss America Association promote education [and] teach you to be a leader, think on your feet and stay in shape and, above all, to serve your country," she said.

During her service in Afghanistan, Stevens said, she developed a great deal of pride for her country, particularly for the women who serve in the military. During her deployment, she competed in the inaugural marathon race at Bagram and was the first woman to finish. Stevens now has completed 14 marathons, and she said the one in Afghanistan "was one of the toughest."

"Here I was a woman, running in a country where women were mistreated, defiled and oppressed. ... I was angered as I was running, but at the same time proud -- proud to be not only an American woman but an American soldier fighting for their worth," she said.

She said she thought of Afghanistan's women every step of the way, and it carried her to the finish line.

"We are making a difference," she said. "I know these women are realizing their worth, and some are taking a stand to determine their place in the world."

During her deployment, Stevens said, it was important to keep morale high for the continued strength of the force.

"I was there to take care of the physical injuries," she said, "but I also really saw the emotional side. I saw firsthand that keeping the morale high really helps our soldiers perform better."

"ASY Live" on BlogTalkRadio.com is part of the Defense Department's America Supports You program, which connects citizens and companies with servicemembers and their families serving at home and abroad. Stevens recalled the touches from home that helped her most during her deployment.

"Thoughtful gifts meant a lot to me -- favorite foods or an encouraging e-mail was great, [because] it meant so much that they took time to think about me," she explained. She took the importance of boosting morale a step further with her own personal cause to encourage her fellow servicemembers.

"Since we had electricity over there, I was like, 'Mom, send me a bread machine!' she said. "Whenever I heard they were having a rough day, I baked bread for the soldiers ... just to boost their spirits."

Another important memory of her deployment, Stevens said, was the opportunity to interact with local children despite the language barrier.

"You speak different languages; you've grown up in really different cultures," she said. "We would communicate with the kids by smiling and making funny faces."

Back in the United States after her deployment, Stevens acknowledged, she had the wrong idea about pageants before she got involved in that aspect of her life.

"All I thought these girls did was just wave their hand and look pretty, and that was not something I wanted to be associated with," she said.

That was before she learned that pageant titleholders can make a difference by their ability to serve as spokeswomen and form organizations. "I love to serve, I love to give back," she said. "That's why I am a soldier and a nurse."

The realization that a pageant title could help her make a difference, Stevens said, is when she "learned how to put on make-up instead of camouflage paint."

Stevens said she was impressed by the support she received from other soldiers when she decided to pursue the Miss America title.

"I have brothers and sisters around the world that are so supportive, and I know that whatever it is, they've got your back," she said.

During her pageant, she recalled, 100 soldiers were in the audience, cheering her on. "I didn't know half of them," she said, "but they came to support another soldier.

This continued support from her "family" of servicemembers is now an important part of who she is and will help keep her focused toward her next goal, said Stevens, who will hold her Miss Utah title until July.

"There is so much negative publicity on the news today, and optimism is important," she said. Looking forward, Stevens said, she will rely on her military experience and connection to maintain her optimism and carry her into her next endeavor.

"Wherever you go, if you wear the uniform or sport the military ID card, you connect with people immediately," she said. "I know that will always be a part of me."

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