



A FAMILY OF FIRSTS



Top: GinaMarie and Stephen Doherty of Rhode Island. Stephen is the Auxiliary's first-ever male Department President. His wife, GinaMarie, is Rhode Island's first female VFW State Commander. Above: Stephen Doherty is escorted by Dottie Irving and Christine Begin during the presentation of the Flags at National Convention last July.

Rhode Island is home to husband and wife VFW Auxiliary and VFW leadership team Stephen and GinaMarie Doherty.

But this program year, there is something different about this state's Department President and State Commander. Stephen is the Auxiliary's first-ever male Department President, a role he stepped into following the untimely passing of Rhode Island's Department President, Karyn Faircloth, in August of last year.

GinaMarie is Rhode Island's first female State Commander. Her journey to Rhode Island's highest office followed the traditional 5-year trajectory, and she joins four other female VFW State Commanders serving this year.

Stephen and GinaMarie are a family of veterans supporting veterans. The two met as Navy shipmates in the early 1990s. Stephen credits his wife with inspiring him to join the Auxiliary. Both belong to Post and Auxiliary 5390.

"Even though I proudly served in the U.S. Navy for 20 years, retiring in 1995, I was not eligible to join the VFW," he said. "GinaMarie

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did and has been very active climbing the ranks in Middletown. I started to attend a lot of the events she went to and I was volunteering a lot of my time. I met so many veterans who were there to help other veterans who needed assistance, and seeing the smiles on their faces made all the difference."

Then one evening, while attending an Auxiliary-hosted dinner, he decided to join.

"The Auxiliary President asked me during dinner if I was ready to join the Auxiliary," he said. "I smiled. I listened to the speakers that afternoon and at the end I stood up and said, sign me up."

Not long after joining, Stephen ran for Department Senior-Vice President.

"I thought that in itself was an honor," he said. "I was going to shadow Karyn for a year to learn from her. Sadly, we lost Karyn way too early. So my new focus is to fulfill Karyn's year with her goals and projects. I am honored; to be the first male Department President not just for the Department, but for the country, is like WOW. When I joined, this was never a thought. I just wanted to help others. I am proud to serve our veterans. 'United We Serve.' (Faircloth's theme)."

For GinaMarie, the VFW is an organization that makes her feel like she belongs, and she is thrilled to represent her state.

"I was on active duty when I joined and they welcomed me like family," she said. "They helped me understand how to transition from Naval service to veteran service. I am very proud to represent my state and show the nation that females and males can do the job they are elected to. Steve has always been a great leader in the Navy and the Boy Scout community, and he gets along with almost any person, so he will make a great President. (Steve and I) work well together because we love each other very much. I never envisioned how much fun it would be to serve together while making history!"

Stephen beams about his wife's accomplishments and dedication to veterans, too.

"I am so proud of GinaMarie for making Commander," he said. "She has been sharing her years of experience with me and she's taught me the

ways of the VFW, which, in turn, helped me better understand the Auxiliary. We are very excited to be partners in an organization that is dear to our hearts. As husband and wife, we do most things together. This is just another opportunity for us to grow."



Scott Jamieson/Photo by Mike Lynn Jr.

Stephen's Auxiliary family also includes a male Department Senior Vice-President, Scott Jamieson, who initially joined the Men's Auxiliary on the eligibility of his maternal grandfather, World War II veteran Peter J. Rustek. When he learned that the VFW Auxiliary became gender-neutral and the Men's Auxiliary was going to be disbanded, he accepted when Faircloth offered him a VFW Auxiliary application.

"It's refreshing to have such a large group of dedicated people with diverse talents working toward the same goals," he said. "We have an absolutely wonderful organization with among the noblest of causes. You'd be hard-pressed to run into a person on the street who doesn't support our nation's veterans. Showing them an outlet, namely the Auxiliary, to turn words into actions, is quite another thing altogether. By being actively out in the community and having a strong, positive presence, we will be able to attract new members and keep them active within their respective Auxiliaries."