

## “Student Affairs Talk” • Matt Morris, Student Veterans Association • November 1, 2021

**Q: Appreciate you being here, Matt. You serve as the president of the Student Veterans Association — tell us what all that entails and how it’s going?**

MORRIS: Basically, my job is to do the relationship-building outside of our organization. We’ve dealt with Purple Heart Homes doing service projects. It was about three weeks ago now, we installed a wheelchair ramp at a disabled veteran’s house — he had really been trapped in his own home, because he just had stairs and can’t get up and down them very well. We were happy to do that. We’ve done things like that in the past with Purple Heart Homes. In the past month, we’ve really tried to hit the golf tournament hard to raise money for the Student Veteran Scholarship endowments. We’ve worked with the West Point Society of Upstate South Carolina recently. Through a personal contact, we’ve also worked with Upstate-Carolina Adaptive Golf. That nonprofit was also started by a disabled veteran and another buddy who’s a veteran. They’ve helped us plan our golf tournament; they’ve been a huge help. Veteran One, they’ve been HUGE in helping us out this semester and recent months as well.

**Q: The SVA was recently awarded National Chapter of the Year by the Student Veterans of America — what did that honor mean to you as the leader of the organization?**

MORRIS: Obviously, that was awesome. We won Chapter of the Year out of roughly 1,500 other chapters under the national SVA blanket. Honestly, we weren’t expecting it. The last year has been just crazy and honestly, we were just doing what we could with what we had. I guess that was enough to earn Chapter of the Year. I thought we did a pretty good job of trying to keep our members engaged and doing anything possible with all of the restrictions we had to deal with. It was a lot of virtual events; we did a Q&A and actor who is also a Clemson alum from the movie, *The Outpost*. The director of the movie is also a West Point grad.

**Q: One of the things the SVA is responsible for is putting on events — you have an upcoming golf tournament on November 12. Tell us more about the meaning behind this year’s event and how folks can get involved.**

MORRIS: We’ve done a golf tournament in the past. Last year was crazy, so we had to take a hiatus. We’re bringing it back this year and our goal is to raise money to establish the Mike Smalley Scholarship Endowment. He was a Navy vet who never attended Clemson, but was a die-hard fan and passed away from lung cancer. We’ve been working with his family to establish the endowment; it was a scholarship fund, but they had to personally contribute to the fund each year. This year, the goal is to establish an endowment fund so years and years down the road they don’t have to keep putting money into the account. We can put the initial required amount in and that scholarship will be given out indefinitely to students here at Clemson.

**Q: Your military background was with the United States Navy — how long were you with the service? What was the experience like and what were some of your responsibilities?**

MORRIS: I was in for six years and three months. I was what we typically call a “nuke” — a nuclear machinist’s mate. I was able to go to a secondary school to become an engineering laboratory technician. My primary title was basically a mechanic. But with the extra school, I leaned more toward laboratory work. I sampled and analyzed the coolant for the nuclear reactor that powers the submarine and the steam plant water that runs the whole sub system. Most of my time was in a stainless steel laboratory on a submarine a few hundred feet under the water. I did that for a while and got to go on a deployment. I showed up to the boat while we were in shipyard and if you talk to anyone in the Navy who’s ever been on a boat in shipyard, it’s pretty miserable. I was lucky enough with my deployment; we pulled into Norway, Greece, Gibraltar. It wasn’t terrible. I got back from that and decided that I was good with that contract being fulfilled. I decided to get out and worked for a little while; I was situating my life and adjusting to being a civilian again. Honestly, what brought

us to Clemson is my wife and I were sitting at a bar in San Diego and watching them win the 2018 National Championship. She’s from about an hour away from here and grew up coming to Clemson games. After they won, I was excited with her but asked, ‘Who’s Clemson?’ she told me all about growing up and going to the games. So, I started looking into their engineering program and now we’re here.

**Q: How did you meet your wife?**

MORRIS: We both lived in Charleston at the same time for a few years but didn’t know it. I didn’t meet her until I moved up to Virginia, where I was stationed. I came back to Charleston for a friend’s wedding and that’s where I met her — and the rest is history.

**Q: How did the transition back to civilian life go? Any specific challenges you faced after enrolling at Clemson?**

MORRIS: Probably navigating the education system in general. The military is really good at trying to keep you in. as soon as they figure out you’re not going to re-enlist, they don’t care to put more effort into your development. I worked for about a year after I got out because that was the only way we could keep some income and figure out how to be a civilian again. Pretty much the entire time I was working, I was trying to figure out how to apply to school. What requirements I needed, whether or not I needed to take the SAT or ACT again — all that stuff. I didn’t realize pretty much all veterans have to apply as transfer students. We get some credit through joint service transcripts. The Air Force gets actual college credit for their military time. But everyone else has to apply as transfer students because of the joint service transcripts. But not many institutions will accept those credits — it’s a catch-22. To apply as a transfer, you have to have a certain number of credits that will transfer. It’s a lot to figure out when the military kicks you out. That was a struggle. Once I figured it out, though, it’s been going pretty smoothly. It’s a little bit of an adjustment being the older person in the class and not being in school for 10 years. It’s rough to start doing calculus again for the first time since high school; you have 18-year-old students next to me who were seniors in high school last year and never had a gap and pick

## “Student Affairs Talk” • Matt Morris, Student Veterans Association • November 1, 2021

everything up super quick. It’s been good once I figured everything out. I was never a football fan before coming here, but now football is life. When I went to community college before transferring here, it was a little more difficult because most people who go to class don’t spend much time on campus. Their goal is to get the class done, get the credits and transfer. There wasn’t a whole lot of outside-school interaction. I met a couple of friends that were also veterans, my last semester. That was kind of cool. We transferred at the same time. Coming here to Clemson, obviously there’s so much more to do. So much more involvement, so much more offered being a large University. The community here is much bigger than what I was used to at a community college.

**Q: How much has Clemson University’s Office of Military and Veteran Engagement been a resource for you personally, and for the organization?**

MORRIS: When Brennan Beck was here, it was huge. We collaborated on almost everything. Brennan knew everyone on campus. If I had a question on something I needed to get done, or something I needed to find information about, he had a person for it or knew who to go to. Him being advisor for the SVA was awesome. I hated to see him go, but he’s helping a small community of veterans here at Clemson to helping the entire Lowcountry. I wish the best to him and know he’ll do great things down there.

**Q: How has the Student Veteran Center and in particular your involvement with the SVA fostered more connections and better relationships for you among students who have been through similar experiences?**

MORRIS: Like I was saying with Brennan, it’s the connections. The networking has been amazing. I’ve been able to meet the governor and the newly formed secretary of Veterans Affairs for South Carolina, Will Grimsley. I’ve met him multiple times and kind of feel like we’re on a first-name basis by this point. With companies hiring veterans and veteran-owned companies, the networking I’ve gained from being SVA president and working with Brennan in Military and Veteran Engagement — I’ve been able to spread that to the other veterans who frequent Vickery Hall and the community as a whole. It’s an

awesome feeling to say, ‘Hey, I know you’re looking for a job, I know someone who needs to hire someone.’ Just a week ago actually I connected with someone in the state department looking for forensic IT people — I forget the exact title — but I passed it on to a computer science major and I think he’s already had an interview with them. Him telling me, ‘Thanks for sending that contact,’ is really rewarding.

**Q: Academically, what are you studying?**

MORRIS: I’m studying mechanical engineering.

**Q: Have you already started looking into the future thinking what’s next in line for you?**

MORRIS: I’ve been making connections of my own in my field. Being in the military, you spend a lot of time away from your family and friends, and if you’re married — your wife. I’m more tied to a location at this point, and being able to be in the same location as my wife. Really, our ultimate goal is to stay in the Greenville area. It wouldn’t be difficult, with all the industry that’s been brought to the area in the past 5-10 years. I’m more tied to staying in the area, rather than choosing a specific job.

**Q: What types of things do you do when you’re not focused on schoolwork or your role with the SVA?**

MORRIS: It is deer season right now, so I do enjoy going hunting. Me and my friends scuba dive occasionally; Lake Jocassee is actually a pretty good scuba diving spot. We’ve dove in Keowee before, at one of the pump houses. I like mountain biking. I did have knee surgery earlier this year, so I haven’t been able to do a lot of that. I was at physical therapy this morning, trying to get back into that. Basically anything outdoors.

**Q: If someone were looking to get involved in the SVA at Clemson, or visit the Student Veteran Center, what sort of advice would you give them?**

MORRIS: Just take that first step. If you want to come see us, we’re located in 108 Vickery Hall. You can send us an email. Now that we can be back in-person, most of us prefer seeing a face. Come and say hi! Last Saturday, we had an all-expenses paid event at Top Golf and reserved four bays for

a couple of hours. Then we went out and watched Clemson lose to Pitt (laughs). We’re always looking for new people to come and hang out. We do fun stuff, as well as those service projects.