



Louisburg College grad with Tri-County ties serves veterans

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GLEN COVE, New York

Louisburg College graduate Gaitley Stevenson-Mathews never served in the military, however, his work in serving the veteran community is making a difference on the North Shore of Long Island. Those who knew Stevenson-Mathews in the early 1980s, when he was a student at Louisburg, or in the 70s when he spent summers at his grandmother's home in Townsville, North Carolina were well aware not only of his commitment to giving back and his ability to organize and lead, but also of his drive to get things done.

He came to Louisburg via an early admissions program, skipping his senior year of high school.

While at Louisburg he was a member of the Christian Life Council, aided in a Vietnamese resettlement initiative, was a key volunteer during the annual Easter Seals drive, an editor of the school newspaper, recipient of the Cortland B. Smith Award, and was Student Body President. This was in addition to his studies, singing in the college's choral ensemble, and periodically taking time off to parachute with friends at the skydiving center just outside of town.

Stevenson-Mathews, who went by his first name, Robert, when he was a student at the college, did not mind a challenge then and he doesn't mind a challenge now. This is a good thing, given the task he set out to accomplish as it relates to a destructive fire that devastated the local VFW post near his home on the North Shore of Long Island. On August 24 of 2021, Stevenson-Mathews received a text message from a veteran friend saying, "I just heard there is smoke at the VFW. FD is there."

Stevenson-Mathews describes his heart as sinking. Glen Cove's VFW Post 347 was built over 100 years ago by World War I veterans, and while not an official historic landmark, it is an integral part of the city's historic landscape. Even more importantly, it is a place of pride for area veterans and the community. The damage to the building was devastating to the community in many ways."

It was out of concern for the VFW Post that Stevenson-Mathews began a grassroots effort to help secure funds to help with the Post's rebuild. "I knew I had to do something. I also knew it would take calling on friends and putting a structure in place to help secure funds."

His first call was to a close friend, a chef who ran an area restaurant. Once she was onboard and with her vote of confidence, Stevenson-Mathews reached out to others, and in only a few weeks, a committee of nine was formed, a meeting was organized with the leadership of VFW Post, and plans were made to produce an event that ultimately raised over \$20,000 for the post.

Stevenson-Mathews' vision for the event was broader than just a fundraiser. With a father who served in the Navy during the 40's, a mother who served in the Cadet Nurse Corps, a brother, Colonel J. Hunter Mathews (Ret.), who served two tours of duty in Afghanistan, and many friends in the veteran community, Steveson-Mathews envisioned an event that would not only raise funds for the post, but that would also perpetually pay tribute to all local veterans.

While his parents are deceased and his brother lives out of state, Stevenson-Mathews felt he could, at least, put his energy into serving veterans in his hometown and on Long Island. With this in mind, the Phoenix Rising Committee (later renamed the Tribute and Honor Foundation) was created from the nine people involved, and the Phoenix Rising Awards were introduced at the fledgling organization's first fundraising event held at his friend's restaurant, The View Grill. The reference to the mythological phoenix "rising from the ashes" was chosen as it related to the organization's initial mission of raising funds for the post following their devastating fire.

On the heels of the organization's overwhelming success with their first event, the members immediately began plans for the 2nd Annual Gala and Awards Ceremony as all also continued to support other efforts in support of the post. While the inaugural celebration included typical awards such as Leadership, Legacy, and Community Service, for the 2nd annual event, Stevenson-Mathews, now president of the organization, introduced three new awards intended not only to honor veterans or veteran supports, but to also shine light on issues impacting the veteran community and their families.

The three new awards included the "Front Runner Award" to be presented to an organization for being the Frontrunner in raising funds for veteran causes, the "Awareness and Remembrance Award" to be presented to an individual or organization bringing awareness to the alarming rate of suicide among active duty military and veterans, and the "Honoring Award" to be presented to a young person for their efforts in honoring veterans through community projects or initiatives in support of veterans and their families.

The Tribute and Honor Foundation's 2nd Annual Phoenix Rising Awards and Fundraising Gala, not only raised close to \$24,000, bringing the organization's total raised to just under \$44,000, the event also paid tribute to seven veterans and four veteran supporters.

After graduating from Louisburg College, Stevenson-Mathews earned a bachelor's degree from Berea College, where he later returned as a guest artist and visiting professor, and a master's degree from Southern Methodist University. He worked as a professional actor and producer for more than twenty years; later worked in arts administration, and currently is a freelance voice and speech coach. In addition to his volunteer work as President of the Tribute and Honor Foundation, Stevenson-Mathews is a former city councilman and serves on several other boards in the City of Glen Cove on the North Shore of Long Island where he currently resides.

Stevenson-Mathews is the son of the late Jean and Jim Mathews of Red Springs, NC, is grandson of the late Martha Catherine Mathews of Townsville, NC, and nephew of the late Richard and Alma Mathews of Henderson, North Carolina and of Doris and Lewis Reavis of Warrenton, North Carolina.

To learn more about the Tribute and Honor Foundation, the foundation's mission, and the Phoenix Rising Awards, please visit www.phoenixrisingawards.com



The Tribute and Honor Foundation's Greatest Generation Award was presented to WWII veteran George Bunger. The award was presented by Tribute and Honor Foundation President and Louisburg College Alumnus, Gaitley Stevenson-Mathews, who founded the organization. Stevenson-Mathews learned the importance of serving the community from his parents, a value that was reinforced during his Louisburg College years.



On behalf of the Tribute and Honor Foundation, the organization's president and Louisburg College alumnus Gaitley Stevenson-Mathews presents a large framed image of the official insignia of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) with the name of the post below it. Stevenson-Mathews and his nine-member board, presented the gift to VFW Post 347's Commander, Henryk Nowicki, along with an oversized check representing \$23,500 raised by the organization in support of the post's rebuild following a devastating fire. To date, the organization, founded by Stevenson-Mathews, has raised close to \$44,000 for the post while also supporting other initiatives benefiting veterans and their families.

Photo by Adrienne Daley