

Spouse of Retired Coast Guard Officer at the Heart of Ombudsman's Program

AUTHOR NAME

Speaker 1:

A video call interface showing two participants. On the left is Mrs. Wanda Allen-Yearout, an older woman with glasses and a patterned top. On the right is Keisha Reynolds, a woman with long dark hair wearing a black blazer and white earbuds. Below each video feed is a blue banner with white text identifying the participant.

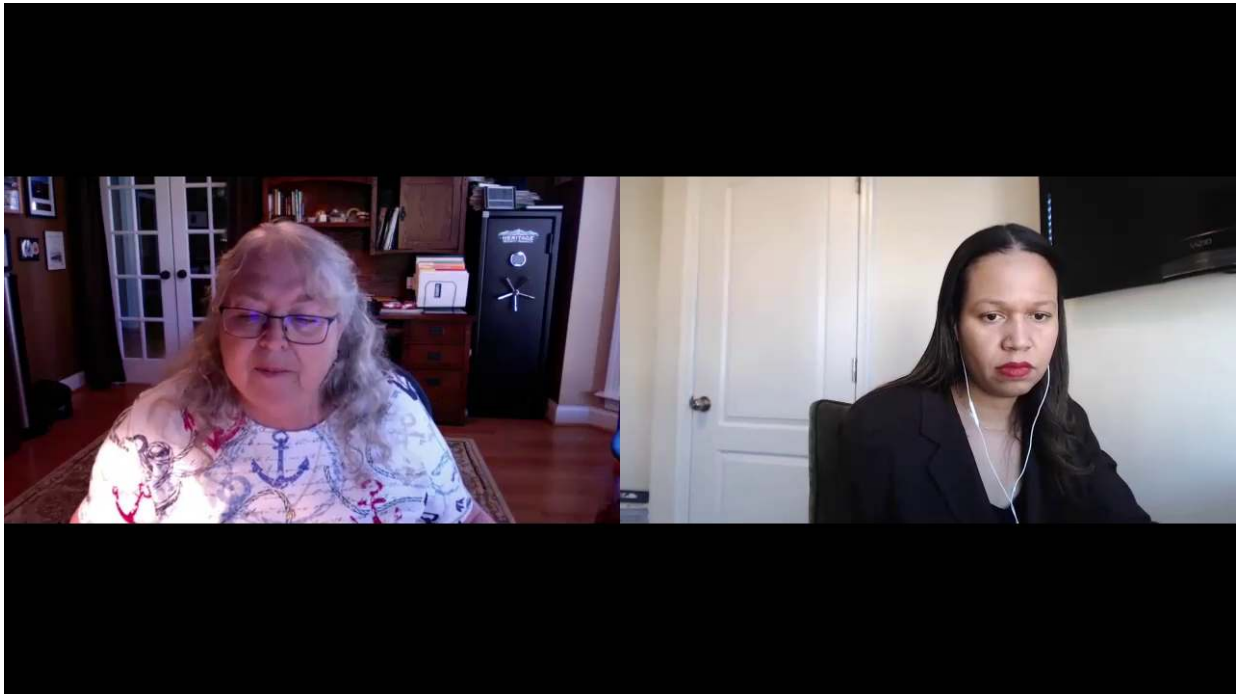
Mrs. Wanda Allen-Yearout
Catalyst for Coast Guard's Ombudsman Program,
Spouse of Retired Officer, Capt. (ret.) Tom Yearout

Keisha Reynolds
MyCG Staff

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I would like to welcome Mrs. Wanda Allen Year out to the Coast Guard's My CG platform, Mrs. Allen Year out was the catalyst for starting the Ombudsmen Program at the Coast Guard 35 years ago. And that's what we're here to discuss today, the celebration of the Ombudsmen's Program anniversary. And so I'm really thrilled to be joined by Mrs. Wanda Yearout here today. Welcome!

Speaker 2:



Thank you for having me.

Speaker 1: Thank you for being here. Well, I definitely want to dive right into the Ombudsmen Program, but for those people who are listening who may not even know or be aware of what the program is, can you start off by just giving us an overview as to what it is?

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Speaker 2: Oh, well basically the Ombudsman is a volunteer spouse and she's the conduit for all of the information from the command to the families, from the families back to the command. I also used to tell everybody that they're the yellow pages, but nobody knows what the yellow pages is anymore. You were a resource person. So if you've got to ask the question, you needed to have that information handy, so you can kind of, if there's a lot of stuff that goes with it, but that's the main, nuts and bolts right there.

Speaker 1: Yes. Okay. Thank you for that explanation . Now, just because you mentioned it and I know times have changed but can the Ombudsman also be a man?

Speaker 2: Yes, yes, yes. yes.

Speaker 1: Okay. All right. That's great. So yes. So there's no gender assignment to be in an Ombudsman. You just need to be a spouse, a Coast Guard spouse. Yes. Okay. All right. And so, can you explain to me then why was creating the Ombudsman Program so important? And I know this happened in the 1980s, but why was it important to you?

Speaker 2: Oh, geez. Well, for one thing, I happened to be doing my master's thesis and I was sitting with the Navy and I was looking at all their stuff and I was like, where's ours? I had no idea this was out there. And, you know, my father was a retired chief and I watched my family go through all this without any help whatsoever, you know, and I always thought I was pretty good at being a Coast Guard spouse but then when I saw all this sort of stuff, I thought well, if I need this, everybody else might need it too, you know?

Speaker 1: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about what were some of those needs that you felt like were being missed at the Coast Guard at the time?

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Speaker 2: Oh, geez. Well it just like, there's so many little stations in the Coast Guard where there is maybe five or six guys, and you're a long way from anywhere and there's not a commissary or a doctor or an exchange at hand. You just kind of get put there and you're just supposed to deal with it. Well, it really helps if you have somebody help you deal with it when you first get there, you know, somebody that says, oh, well, you know this store has this kind of stuff and wait for this sale or whatever it is. Or if you need your car fixed call this guy, I'll give you a military discount, you know? That kind of stuff. Or if somebody is having a real problem, you know, take it to the command, see what they say about it, bring it back and hopefully fix things for people. There's a lot of people that got out there and were just on their own and didn't like it and wanted to go home to mom and dad and the guy put in his papers and got out. So mission readiness and retention, big, big, big issue right there.

Speaker 1: Yeah, absolutely. And so, you know, you speak to something very important, the fact that you experienced this firsthand. And so tell me a little bit about some of your experiences. I know that you also were a daughter of someone in the military and then, so what's your experience as far as, the military lifestyle?

Speaker 2: Wow. It really teaches you to be independent and self-sufficient, and the thing is if you have that kind of personality and you're willing to, you know, make that effort. But if you're somebody that kind of person that waits for people to come to you, you're going to be in trouble, you know, so you really need to have somebody that's going to look out for those people and put your hand out to them. So that's why the Ombudsmen are so important.

Speaker 1: I love the way you explained that. So tell me what was in your mind the day that you wrote this letter that I found out about? So in 1982, you apparently authored a letter to AMRO Gracey Explaining the need for the Ombudsman Program.

Speaker 2: Oh, it was 1983.

Speaker 1: Okay. Yeah. So what was your intention and what was in your mind at the time?

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Speaker 2: Gotcha. I had been asked to sit in on a Navy training. I had been at the Family Service Center and they say, come on we're going to take you. And we're going to go to the Ombudsmen quarterly meeting. And at that time in San Francisco, we had several big Navy bases and a lot of them did six- month deployments and you know, that sort of stuff. They had carrier groups and air groups and all that sort of stuff that came together and they would all deploy out together. So it was a big deal, you know, predeployment deployment reunion, that whole thing. And I was just gobsmacked, like look at this, you know, here's the guys in uniform showing up and talking and they're figuring this out and everybody's got their marching orders and I'm like, I've stood on that pier when you at times when you didn't have any idea of this.

Speaker 2: And I was like, I want this, I need this. You know it, and on the way home, this was funny because my mother was so mad at me when I got home and told her this. I was driving and I had my notepad next to me in the car and every red light, I would write something else down. I wanted to say, and by the time I got home, I had this whole sheet of stuff and I was just like on fire . It's nothing I did. I said, this is who I am. And this is what I saw, you know? and I'm at San Francisco state getting my master's and I'm doing this research and I want to know if we're going to do this, are we going to do this?

Speaker 2: And I sent it to ADM Gracey, who was the Commandant, you know, and my poor husband thought I was going to get him in trouble. But, I got this very nice letter back saying, you know, I've been thinking the same thing. So just wait, you know, and within a matter of time, you know, everything started happening. They put in family programs at first, they weren't staffed very well, but they were starting and they were trying, and they were getting people out there. And I was like, yay!

Speaker 1: Oh, that must have felt like such a victory.

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Speaker 2: Oh yeah. And I sent ADM Gracey my thesis, you know. And the funny thing was they showed up in San Francisco, not long after that. And I was at some cocktail party and they were at it and I was like crazy. And I'm like pulling my husband to come. And we get in line with everybody else and go up and shake hand . And I told him who I was and he said, I read your thesis and his wife was already like you and I need to talk. So, you know, we kind of got over in the corner and we started talking about that sort of stuff. So it was really brave, you know . I was just so happy.

Speaker 1: Okay. So how long was it, in between?

Speaker 1: From the time of the cocktail party was the Ombudsman Program already in existence at that point?

Speaker 2: They, they were starting. And, the thing was, they were, you had some pushback because a lot of the older people or senior people were like, you don't need this, they don't need this blah, blah, blah . Anyhow, there was some pushback for awhile with starts and stops and some of the commands were really eager to do this and have the help. And others were going, nope. You know, my XO can do everything. And it took us a while to pick the right person and if she doesn't work then that's worse than having nobody, because then the reputation kind of takes a hit because people pass that around with word of mouth. So you have to be real diligent in picking Ombudsmen. So that was one of the other things, you know, that we had to work on is teaching the commands, how to do this and how to work with these people. So it took quite a learning curve.

Speaker 1: Got it. So how did you go about doing that? How did you work with the commands and as you say, teach them or educate them or work alongside them to on board the Ombudsmen?

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Speaker 2: Well, you know, my place in the Coast Guard realm of things now is that I was an officer's spouse. So a lot of the things that we were trying to do was for enlisted spouses or senior enlisted spouses to kind of pick this up and carry it because the one thing that we didn't want to do is have them see this, kind of as the caste system, you know, officer versus enlisted. And we've got information over here for these people. And we got information over here for these people. No, no, no. We are a family. Everybody gets the same information. We're here to help you, but in order to do that, we had to kind of grow it. So we had to really watch who wanted to be an Ombudsman and how that fit in that particular unit. So I'm saying that most of the time after that, it was me going with our unit Ombudsmen to the trainings, which was sometimes very dismal and me making several comments, either on the phone or in writing back to headquarters.

Speaker 2: And at this time headquarters is trying to stand- up everybody, you know, like Chris is there now in charge of the Ombudsman Program. Well, for a long time, we had nobody up there. It was kind of like, an auxiliary duty for somebody that wasn't what they were hired to do, but it was like, oh, by the way, you've got some extra time here. You have the Ombudsman Program now. And it was kind of got passed around and passed around and passed around. So, it was hard to get everybody to focus in and really concentrate on the training materials and get it the same across the Coast Guard know c ause we had little pockets of people doing this and this and this . And it's like, no, everybody needs to have the same training.

Speaker 1: Yeah, that makes total sense. You were trying to standardize something and also kind of building it at the same time. So, so, okay. So the letter came in 1982. And then how quickly would you say things started to normalize where you had an official ombudsmen program?

Speaker 2: Ooh, that's kind of hard. It's kinda hard.

Speaker 1: Because of the starts and stops?

Speaker 2: Yeah. I, I would say probably 85, 86, because the first afloat unit we went to after that 86 to 88, they had the program installed, but the program then was tell your Ombudsman to go to the nearest Navy training.

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Speaker 1: Oh, got it. Okay. Yeah.

Speaker 2: So when I got there, my husband was, let's see, I think he was an XO that time. So, the CO's wife didn't want to go, you know, and they were supposed to invite their command spouses to come with them. So I went with her and sat through it again. And I was basically, you know, sitting there going like this every time they do the Navy part of it, where they say, you know, this is our command structure and these are the people there they're going to be staying at the home port that are your support. So if you need something, you go to them and then it's and their whole chain completely different. Their budget was so much better than ours. And they had all of this staff, you know, active duty guys and everything. So she'd be sitting there listening to all this and I'm going, nope.

Speaker 2: You know, I'd be like, okay, cross that one out. Okay. And we're still sitting there. And every time she'd look at me and I go like this, she would cross it out on her paper, you know, and then we'd get to a break and I would explain to her, okay, we don't handle this. We don't have that. You know, you need to do this, you need to call this person, you know, but thankfully she was willing to listen to all of it and she was a great Ombudsman. But again, when I got through with going to that thing, I was on the phone. I go, hey, listen.

Speaker 1: Now we need this part of it. Right.

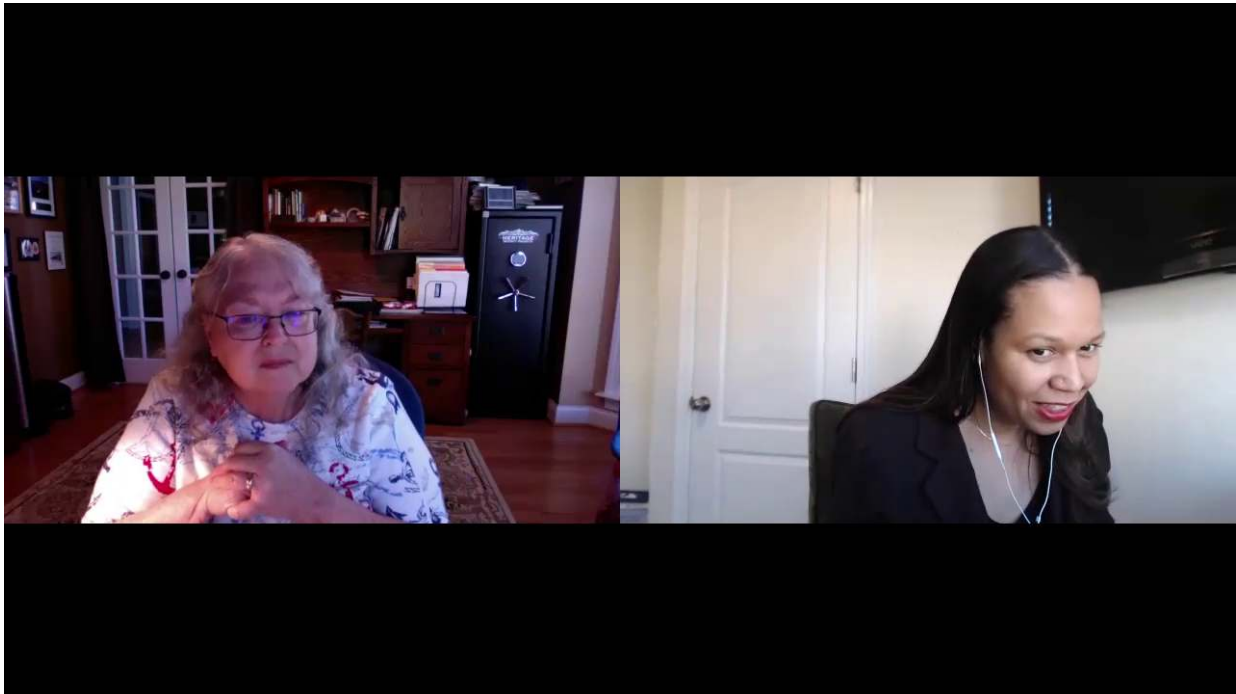
Speaker 2: I mean, we've got these people they're going to training, but it's the wrong training. I mean, some of it's good. Some of it's really good, but it doesn't fit us, it fits the Navy, which it should because it's their program, but it's not our program.

Speaker 1: That makes total sense. Yeah. Yeah. So, so now, this may be a stretch, but you know, you might have a million examples for this, but do you have anything that comes to mind as far as the real impact that you've seen the program make over the years? Or was it a specific Ombudsmen, or whether it be the program in its totality?

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Speaker 2: Oh, geez. you know, I had the privilege to be at several awards and commendations. And before we had the Ombudsman of the Year stuff and some of these people bless their hearts, I mean, they have done some heroic stuff, you know, where they really put their own life on the back burner and got in there, you know, whether there was an accident or a fatality at their unit. Or like, you know, what was it 2019 when we didn't get paid and everybody, you know, needed food. And we had trouble in housing areas where, oh, the contract to fix the units wasn't being carried out and things like that. They have to see these people and really go to bat for their families and take all of that back to the command and say, this is going on with the families. You know, we need some help here or what's your stand on this and then go back and tell the families, and then come back with the plan, you know, to put into action to help these people. And I've got to tell you, the senior enlisted in the chiefs, they wanted this program, I think as much as anybody else did, but they've been a big help, big help.

Speaker 1: That's wonderful. Yeah. That was a great illustration of how the Ombudsmen actually service the Coast Guard families. So I wanted to ask you this now that this program has come to fruition.



I know that, there was an award that was named in your honor, it's called the Ombudsman of the Year. So



how did that feel to have this award named in your honor?

Speaker 2: Well, I was kind of flabbergasted at first because, you know. I've been a squeaky wheel and just kept on pushing people. And then I volunteered to be the Ombudsman Coordinator, a couple of different places where we were. And during that time, I really pushed to stabilize the training

Speaker 1: No, that's good information. Yes.

Speaker 2: I just wanted everybody to have this kind of support system so that they would be happy and productive and self-sufficient, and the husbands would be okay to deploy and they would stay in a career and that whole bit. You know, that was my thing. I mean, it's like the family business listen in a family business, you know, every time you get a little extra, you stick it back in there. So that was my whole idea, but I was amazed that they decided to name it after me. And I just think Skip for that. Cause that was Skp Bowen's doing.

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Speaker 1: Yeah. Well, congratulations again, I know it's, you know, years, decades later, but congratulations again for that, which brings me to the fact that we're actually coming up on the next, Ombudsman of the Year Award that will be happening soon. And then of course we're celebrating 35 years of the Ombudsman Program as of March 26th. So could you speak to what that feels like to know that this program that you started, it has now lasted for 35 years. What does that feel like?

Speaker 2: Wow, well, you know, one of the things that we've talked about when we first started was the need to grow this and every year make it better and keep our ears open and talk to people and see what they need, what they want and how we can help. And, like I said, we kind of had to wait for a few dinosaurs to retire and people to be more accepting of this kind of help because before it was like, that's your problem. You deal with it. So seeing people really look for an Ombudsman and talk about their Ombudsman, when they transfer, you know, hooking back up with their Ombudsman and seeing how that really help in keeping the family stable. And again, they're ready. The guys already, I keep saying guys, sorry about that, the Coasties are ready to deploy, you know. And, they don't have to worry about what's going on at home and keep their head in the game, you know and that's why I'm seeing this kind of stabilization and let's get it up there and, and just fine tune it and keep it going.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Yeah. You're absolutely right. And so now we're at approximately 350 ombudsman. And so what thoughts, advice, recommendations or congratulations would you offer to the 350 approximately that we have?

Speaker 2: Oh, wow. I just had to tell them thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Because you know, putting your life on hold and your kids and your own career, or whatever's going on in, in your life and taking on this kind of stress when people, you know, never, nobody calls you when they're happy. Everybody calls you when they're upset, you take that kind of thing on and not get burnt out, because that was the other thing was self care, you know, learned to put the phone down and walk away for a few minutes, take care of yourself. So you can come back to take care of everybody else. You know, it's just telling them, thank you, keep up the good work and grow it. You know, if you find other spouses that you think would be good at this. And, you know, let's just keep growing this program.

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Speaker 1: I love it. are there any final thoughts or words that you want to offer in general? Anything that we didn't cover that you would like to say?

Speaker 2: Oh, geez. You know, like you were talking about, I had mostly female spouses. I had some active duty people that, you know, she was enlisted or something like that, but her husband was on our unit and she was on the land unit or whatever like that. I passed among certain people, I think, you know, finding the people that are interested that are related to the command and everything and, utilizing them, you know.

Speaker 1: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And to your point, you know, the Coast Guard continues to evolve. And so I know that you've witnessed a lot of that over the years. And so, yeah, I'm sure that that's going to translate into the Ombudsman Program as well.

Speaker 2: And it's in good hands. I really think everybody else now can put on their thinking caps. And when they've got a good idea how to make things better, you know, send it up the flagpole, send it to Christine.

Speaker 1: That's right. So do you have any involvement at all with the Ombudsman Program still?

Speaker 2: No, I haven't been to any of their trainings. When they do the award, I usually come for the ceremony because I'm in Raleigh. So it's easy for me to get to DC. But you know, over the years, a lot of the people that have won my award, we started like Facebook friends and that sort of stuff. So I keep up with them, you know, it's interesting to see where everybody's gone and what's happened to them and that sort of stuff. So it's cool.

Speaker 1:

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Okay. Well, listen, I thank you so much for your time. It's been a real pleasure. I've learned a lot and hopefully everyone listening will learn a lot as well. Thank you so much!

Speaker 2: Yeah. Anybody have any questions that, you know, like corporate memory. (raised hands and laughed)

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