When Stephanie Grimes and her husband, Nick, moved to Pittsburgh in 2011, they pulled off something of a career switch.

Nick was leaving the U.S. Army to return to civilian life, and Stephanie began working as a civilian for the Army in a statewide program assisting veterans and their families. Then, Nick started working with Meals on Wheels in Hazelwood, and Stephanie would join him in making deliveries. They both got to know some of the neighborhood’s senior citizens.

Those experiences of serving veterans and Hazelwood residents came into play when, in 2016, The Mission Continues wanted to hire its first staff person in the Pittsburgh area.

“I saw the job description, and it really fit a lot of things to me,” said Ms. Grimes, who served as the organization’s city impact manager until assuming a new national position with the group earlier this year.

Based in St. Louis, Missouri, The Mission Continues is a nonprofit formed in 2007 “to provide opportunities to post-9/11 veterans to find purpose at home through community impact.” It expanded to Pittsburgh in 2014, launched locally with a grant from The Heinz Endowments.

Since then, the Hazelwood Platoon, the first of three in the Pittsburgh area, has conducted dozens of volunteer events, from rehabbing vacant lots to upgrading classrooms. Along the way, a general desire to do good has become more focused on “ensuring that the current, local Hazelwood residents are benefiting from revitalization efforts in Hazelwood,” Ms. Grimes said.

By positioning veterans to serve their communities, The Mission Continues challenges stereotypes about men and women returning from military service — for instance, that they all suffer from incapacitating post-traumatic stress disorder — that lead to an imbalance in the allocation of resources, said Rob Stephany, the Endowments’ director of Community & Economic Development.

Historically, 54 percent of vets integrate well in civilian life, returning to their families and finding suitable work, Mr. Stephany explained. That leaves 46 percent who face challenges that hinder their re-entry — challenges largely due to not having the connection with others that they had in the military. But of that group, the 2 percent exhibiting the most severe needs have received 98 percent of resources for veterans. The rest struggle on their own.

The Mission Continues recognizes that “every single one of them has been infected with the service gene,” Mr. Stephany asserted. The group organizes veteran volunteers into service platoons, each with a special mission focus.

The Hazelwood Platoon focuses on neighborhood revitalization while emphases for the other two in the Pittsburgh region are youth for the platoon in the Homewood neighborhood, and refugee and immigrant support for the one in the South Hills.

As city impact manager, Ms. Grimes oversaw the operations of all three platoons, and the experience was inspirational, she said.

“It’s provided me with the reinvigorating hope that there are people who want to come together in order to make our country better. That

Elvin Green is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer.
Stephanie Grimes, second from left, shares a laugh with other volunteers as they build a pantry at Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church in Hazelwood. Ms. Grimes, The Mission Continues’ manager of staff experience, joined the veterans group’s Hazelwood Platoon in working on the project that was a collaboration with the church and the community development nonprofit Grounded Strategies.
“WE WERE THE FIRST CITY TO SAY, ‘WHAT IF WE REALLY INVESTED IN A NEIGHBORHOOD LONG-TERM—WOULD THAT ADD UP TO BIGGER CHANGES OVER TIME?’”

Megan Andros, senior program officer for veterans, The Heinz Endowments

sounds cheesy but that’s the truth.” She described the veterans she has gotten to know as “unique individuals who have a deep desire to serve the community and also to be a part of a community.”

Sometimes the desires are so deep the veterans don’t realize they exist. They just know their civilian life is missing something. Such was the case with Sean Tyler.

In the fall of 2017, as he was preparing to leave southwestern New York to pursue a master’s degree in social work at the University of Pittsburgh, a friend told him about The Mission Continues.

He had retired from the U.S. Army in 2013 as a captain after spending his adult life to that point in the military, and the transition to civilian life was difficult.

“The military is very much like a family,” he said. “You have the structure, the organization, and people with similar experiences. From 18 to 34, I was in the military. Then I’m back [in civilian life] with totally different experiences than most people.”

It wasn’t until he did a service project with the Hazelwood Platoon in May 2018 that Mr. Tyler decided to become part of the organization. He assumed the position of platoon leader in January.

“When I found The Mission Continues, it was like being with family again, a group of people that serves a purpose,” he said.

The Hazelwood Platoon’s work also has special significance to those with close ties to the community. Teira Collins, a Hazelwood resident who has volunteered with Mission Continues projects, appreciates what it has done for her and for the neighborhood, and considers her work with the group “the best experience of my life.”

Ms. Collins became acquainted with the platoon when members were working across from her home in the building that houses Keystone Church of Hazelwood and Center of Life, a nonprofit that provides academic and arts programming for youth. The group was building bookcases, painting walls and making custom curtains. After being housebound for a year following extensive back surgery, she was eager to get out and volunteered to help with the project.

The Mission Continues’ warm welcome to Ms. Collins and her son Judah led to more volunteering and developing friendships, in part due to the Hazelwood Platoon’s approach of building relationships by doing multiple projects over time.

“When they pull up, everyone knows who they are,” she said. “Their impact has been absolutely astronomical, and they keep coming back. It’s not like they came and then they left.”

Similarly moved by the platoon’s presence is Qamara Miles, a Hazelwood native who now lives in another community south of Pittsburgh. She was struggling to readjust to civilian life after a tour of duty with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan when a counselor at the Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania referred her to The Mission Continues.

“It took me a long time to find this organization,” she said. “I almost cried when they told me that they had a Hazelwood Platoon.”

In May, Ms. Miles volunteered for a project in Hazelwood at Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church, where the platoon upgraded the space by making benches, painting and performing other improvements. Serving in her old neighborhood with fellow vets allowed her to re-experience a type of bond that might not be possible with individuals who have not served. She plans to be “involved in a lot more projects.”

Ms. Miles’ eagerness is welcomed since the Hazelwood Platoon is a leader in providing women opportunities in The Mission Continues’ work, a source of pride for Megan Andros, the Endowments’ senior program officer for veterans. “Sometimes women are not acknowledged as vets,” she said.

The Hazelwood Platoon acknowledges them by developing all-women service projects, dubbed “Her Mission.” The first, in 2017, was at the Spartan Community Center, which houses classroom space for Center of Life. Between 60 and 70 women painted, built furniture and refurbished the parent lounge.

“We piloted ‘Her Mission’ for The Mission Continues,” Ms. Andros said. “Now there are a bunch of cities across the country that do it.”

Pittsburgh’s platoons have emerged as leaders in other ways, too.

“We were the first city to say, ‘What if we really invested in a neighborhood long-term—would that add up to bigger changes over time?’” Ms. Andros noted.

In Hazelwood, the neighborhood focus led the group to partner with Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, an affiliate of a Washington, D.C.–based home improvement nonprofit, and to assist in an aggressive program to repair houses for seniors, veterans and low-income homeowners.

CEO Steve Hellner-Burris said that since 2012, Rebuilding Together has helped to increase equity for 200 to 225 Hazelwood homeowners through its housing repair and rehabilitation efforts.
Just as The Mission Continues uses partnerships to position veterans to serve communities, it also works with other groups to serve the veterans themselves and help them to connect to resources. One such collaboration is with PA Serves, a program run by Pittsburgh Mercy, which operates behavioral health, trauma treatment, community wellness and other programs as well as systematically coordinating services for vets.

“If I have a vet or family member that has a need that’s outside of what The Mission Continues does, our partnership with PA Serves allows me as a provider to ensure that I can refer that individual, and that that individual will be taken care of,” Ms. Grimes explained.

The Mission Continues has 682 “affiliates,” people who have attended an event or engaged with the group in some way. Of those, 426 are platoon members — 273 vets and 153 community members — who have signed up to receive updates. Most of them, Ms. Grimes said, are consistent and active. Other than her and the new city impact manager, all are volunteers.

That includes the platoon leaders. An old military saying declares that the non-commissioned officer — the sergeants — are the backbone of the Army. The Mission Continues hangs its success on the performance of its platoon leaders, tapping into leadership skills developed in the military. The position entails a one-year commitment, which is renewable, but not indefinitely.

“The intent is to create a leadership role for a veteran leader every year or two years,” Ms. Grimes said.

The Mission Continues also has worked with local stakeholders to determine how they could best continue serving a community in the midst of change. With the help of the LUMA Institute, known for innovative approaches to organizational development, a collaborative vision emerged that emphasizes three things that would be central to The Mission Continues going forward: revitalization of indoor spaces where residents and youth gather, revitalization and use of outdoor green space, and assisting homeowners with home repairs and home safety. Other priorities for the Hazelwood Platoon are increasing community participation and identifying opportunities for increasing organizational capacity among their community partners.

To help maintain an innovative outlook on its work, The Mission Continues has since arranged for six platoon members to receive training in LUMA methods, and Ms. Grimes earned certification that might have led to her working herself out of a job. In April, she began a newly created position as manager of staff experience for the more than 50 chapters of The Mission Continues across the country. Part of her work involves piloting a program to make the organization a more effective advocate for veterans, and helping them learn to be more effective advocates for their communities.

Research has shown that the military is currently the most trusted institution in America, Ms. Grimes said. “So what we know is that veterans, just by nature of serving their country, often get the benefit of the doubt in the trust category.

“And we know that our veterans are able to get into certain doors. Our responsibility is to make sure that when they get into those doors, that they know whereof they speak, and that they have insights into the community, so that they can give voice to the voiceless — and, at the same time, empower those people from the communities to be alongside them.”

All of this builds on, rather than replaces, the hands-on volunteerism that The Mission Continues started with. The organization is pursuing not just the physical rehabilitation of Hazelwood, but the strengthening of relationships.

As Ms. Grimes put it: “Painting a bench is a small act of love and worth that can lead to transformative change.”