

VETERAN REPAIRS

BY TAIJA PANDOLFI

Patrice Cook sat back in the metal chair and adjusted her thin-framed, black-rimmed glasses as two delicate gold necklaces rested unobtrusively beneath the collar of her pink turtleneck. Her eyes were sharp and intelligent, but she was quick to laugh, recounting stories about her siblings with a sheepish smile.

“I was a real daddy’s girl. My brothers used to poke me and call me ‘Little Princess,’” the former Army staff sergeant said during a conversation in the atrium of the Pittsburgh office building where she works. “Now they’re nice to me. They’re like, ‘You can beat us up now.’”

Ms. Cook, or “Cookie” to her military friends, joined the Army just five days after graduating from high school in 1989 and found herself in a foreign country within six months. After growing up with six brothers in Mt. Union, a “tiny, tiny town outside of Harrisburg,” she set her sights on the world outside her neighborhood.

“I was one of those kids who just couldn’t stay still,” she said. “I refused to be stuck in this little town, doing what everyone was doing—and I don’t regret that decision.”

During her Army career, Ms. Cook was stationed in locations around the globe, including Germany, Saudi Arabia, Bosnia, Iraq and several cities in the United States. These experiences widened her perspective and connected her to a “community [that] was the whole world,” which she described as an overwhelming benefit of joining the military, and something she missed when she left active duty in 2000.

As a Mission Continues volunteer, Army veteran Patrice Cook now spends a good amount of her time carrying construction tools rather than military weapons.

She moved to Pittsburgh in 2012 for a job as a transportation assistant at Life Pittsburgh, a health care organization for the elderly. But when she arrived in the city, she felt disconnected from the broader community. Her restlessness prompted a decision that would benefit many in the region's extensive veteran population.

In June 2014, through a friendship with fellow veteran and Pittsburgh resident James O'Connor, Ms. Cook helped launch the Pittsburgh platoon of The Mission Continues, a national service organization that connects veterans to community projects and initiatives in their area. She reached out to her network of local veterans to build support for the Pittsburgh chapter of the organization. After the official founding of the platoon, with Mr. O'Connor as its leader, she continued to encourage other veterans who wanted to connect with fellow soldiers and participate in community work to join the team. There are now two Mission Continues groups in the Pittsburgh region, which together have about 140 members.

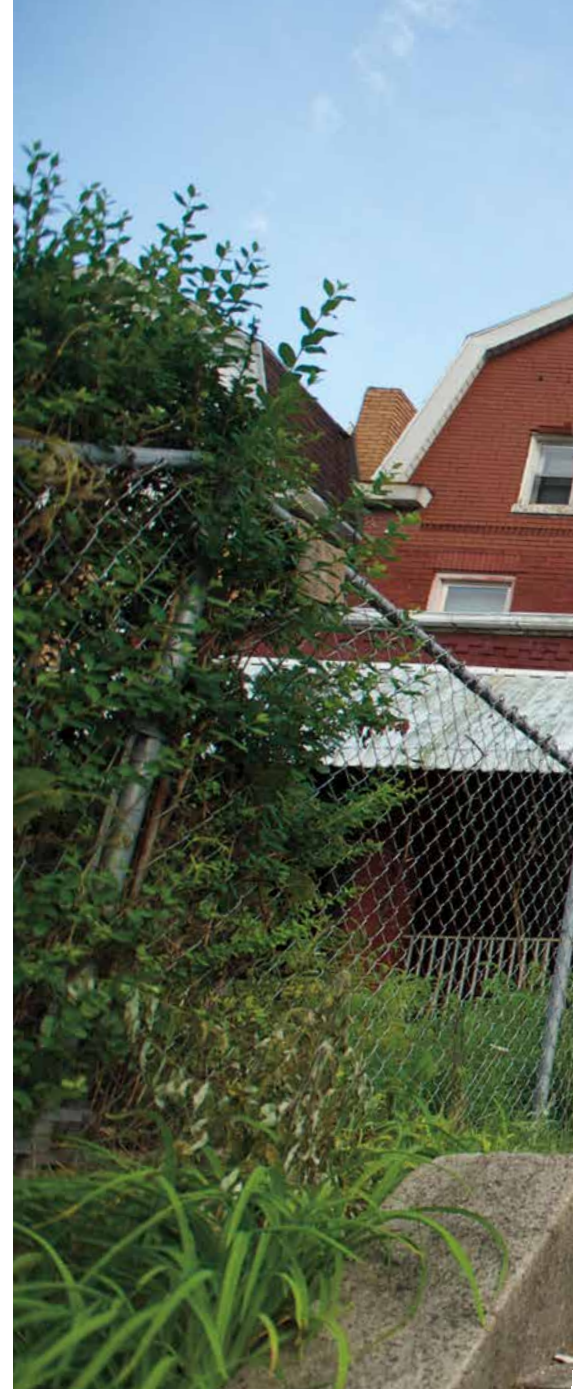
"Patrice is a truly remarkable woman, and she was instrumental in creating and building the first Pittsburgh Service Platoon," Mr. O'Connor said. "She gave the platoon courage and vision as she believed it would continue to grow as a social movement. She also believed that all veterans want to continue to serve once they take off the uniform and that their civilian counterparts want to engage and support veterans as they transition but need a creative way to interact with them."

The Mission Continues platoon in which Ms. Cook and Mr. O'Connor serve focuses on physical projects that it learns about through regional partnerships with organizations such as the local affiliate of Rebuilding Together, a national home improvement nonprofit. Under the direction of Mr. O'Connor, that platoon has concentrated on ongoing projects in Pittsburgh's Hazelwood neighborhood, coinciding with Rebuilding Together's revitalization work in the community.



**"SHE GAVE THE
PLATOON COURAGE
AND VISION AS
SHE BELIEVED IT
WOULD CONTINUE
TO GROW AS A
SOCIAL MOVEMENT."**

James O'Connor
platoon leader, The Mission Continues Pittsburgh



For Ms. Cook, involvement with The Mission Continues has helped boost her sense of purpose and belonging. "I used to just go to work and then come home," she recalled. "Once I got to [volunteer in] Hazelwood and started venturing out, that got me out and about in Pittsburgh."

While not usually associated with sustainability efforts, The Mission Continues' work in Pittsburgh has complemented p4, a new approach for enhancing the quality of life in the region. Launched last year by Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto in partnership with The Heinz Endowments, p4 focuses on the themes of people, planet, place and performance, with the goal of creating a guide for innovative and sustainable development in the city. Having veterans involved in contributing to the current and future well-being of a community reflects the objectives of this initiative.



Volunteering with Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh allows veterans to bond with each other as well as help local residents improve their homes. Army veteran Patrice Cook, standing second from left, joins members of her Mission Continues platoon in taking a break from a home repair project in Hazelwood. Far left, Mission Continues volunteers paint the interior of a Hazelwood house.

Sean Means

Veterans' stories often emphasize their disabilities and needs, rather than explain how multitudes of returning soldiers are eager to repurpose their military skills in civilian life, Ms. Cook said. Although there are certainly veterans who need health care and aid, overlooking those who want to participate creates a sense of isolation, she contends. With The Mission Continues, veterans can meet others who served in the military and now perform essential work in local communities, tapping into a network that boasts nearly a quarter of Pennsylvania's veterans.

Ms. Cook has worked on housing rehabilitation projects in Hazelwood and on renovations to the third floor of the building that's home to Center of Life, a faith-based nonprofit devoted to advancing arts, health and education for children and families. Her tasks have ranged from painting to installing drywall to building fences. "When we're out there doing the physical labor, it shows the

vets are here and really trying to make the world a better place," she said. "It brings groups together in the community."

And because volunteering has taken Ms. Cook to different parts of the city, she views her experiences as recreating the global community she had established after joining the military. "When I got involved in The Mission Continues, it opened a lot of doors for me. It made my horizons broader, and I know more people."

Although she was initially unsure about Pittsburgh after she moved, Ms. Cook credits The Mission Continues with connecting her to the city in ways she did not anticipate, and she hopes to stay in the region. The network she has built has made it easier to adjust to civilian life.

"I still miss [active duty] every day," she said. "I miss the troops, but that's why I have the fellas at The Mission Continues." **h**