

Still Here. Still Building. Even on the Hard Days.

By Camille D. Ford | Founder & Editor-in-Chief

This publication has never been about me. What follows is.

THE EXPECTATION

I thought the work would be enough.

I thought when the pitches went out, people would respond. That's not arrogance. That's the logic of good work. You build something real, you send it to the right people, and the right people recognize it. That's how it's supposed to go.

I've put months of my life into these stories. Stories where we've cried in the interview and there was no need to apologize for it. Stories ranking at the top of the site. I sent the pitches. I waited. The silence was louder than I expected.

THE SILENCE

The silence from the places that should have been my first phone call, that one I'm still working through.

I want to say something carefully here, because I'm not interested in bitterness and I'm not interested in performing strength I don't have right now. What I'm interested in is the truth.

There's a specific discouragement that comes from building something for a community and having that community not show up for you. Veteran Excellence Magazine covers Black veterans, women veterans, veterans no one else is writing about in the way they deserve. I sent this work to the people I thought would understand it most.

A grant denial I can process. A sponsorship that doesn't close I can process. The silence from the places that should have been my first phone call, that one I'm still working through.

THE ASSUMPTION

They assumed I'd be grateful for the access.

Some of what I've encountered this year isn't indifference. It's something more deliberate than that. It's the assumption that I don't know what I'm doing.

One company sent me their logo unsolicited, along with instructions on placement and size. Not as a question. As a directive. As if the next step was obvious and I just needed to be told where to put it. I had to explain, professionally and without the tone I actually wanted to use, that a logo placed in a publication signals sponsored content. That editorial space and advertising space are not the same thing. That my publication is not a bulletin board where you can hang your brand because you decided to.

I shouldn't have had to explain that. But I'm an older Black woman running an independent publication, and some people look at that combination and decide they've found someone they can walk right over. They miscalculated.

Then there's this: I requested a specific subject for a profile. A woman veteran whose story I believed in. The organization offered me a White man instead, presenting him as the face of what they do. I wrote the piece. I gave it everything I had. And then, as if the woman had been available all along, they offered her to me as a follow-on. An afterthought. A second serving.

I wrote her piece too. Both are strong. But I know what happened. I was handed the man first because someone decided he was the story worth telling. The woman was the bonus.

Here's what that actually means editorially. I don't give one organization multiple profiles. This publication doesn't work that way. When I pitch both stories to outlets, I'm not just sharing journalism. I'm actively marketing that organization across my entire distribution network. That's partnership-level exposure. It benefits them. It doesn't benefit the magazine. And nobody asked me if I was comfortable with that arrangement because nobody thought to. They just assumed I'd be grateful for the access.

THE CONDITION

There is no competing publication. There is no blueprint. There is only the work and the person doing it.

I'm an older Black woman trying to break into a lane of journalism that wasn't built with me in mind. I don't have a newsroom behind me. I don't have a mentor who's done this exact thing. I don't have a predecessor to call and ask how they survived the first year. I built the editorial calendar, the VA Facility Recognition Program, the media list, the campaign infrastructure, the grant tracker, the partnership proposals, and every word of every story this publication has ever published. Alone.

Zora Neale Hurston wrote that there are years that ask questions and years that answer. This is a year that is asking me things I didn't know I'd have to answer. Whether I'm built for this. Whether the isolation is temporary or structural. Whether the people who said they believed in this work actually meant it, or whether they were just comfortable watching from a distance.

There is no competing publication. There is no blueprint. There is only the work and the person doing it.

THE AUDIENCE

I reached out. The phone didn't ring.

My personal friends have become spectators. I don't say that with anger. I say it because it's true and because pretending otherwise would be the kind of dishonesty this publication was built against. They're waiting to see if I'll

last. I can feel it. The check-ins that used to be encouragement have become something more like monitoring. The question underneath every conversation is the same one: is she still doing this?

Yes. I'm still doing this.

But I want to be honest about what it costs to build something real without a net. Without the phone call I can make when I'm not sure I'm making the right editorial call. Without someone who has walked this path and can tell me which part of the hard is normal and which part I should be worried about. The loneliness isn't a side effect of this work. On some days, it's the main condition of it.

And then there are the people I sat across from. The veterans who gave me hours of their lives, who shared things they hadn't said out loud before. More than one of them ended our conversation the same way: reach out if you need anything. I believed them.

I reached out. The phone didn't ring.

I'm not writing this to shame anyone. I'm writing it because someone needs to say what it actually feels like to pour yourself into other people's stories and find out that the generosity doesn't always travel both ways. A closed mouth doesn't get fed. I opened mine. And I'm still hungry.

THE LAUNCH

I didn't tell anyone I'd pivoted. I just pivoted and kept going.

I want to address something I've been quiet about. People have been calling this a national launch, and it is one. But it didn't start that way.

I looked into hiring a firm to launch the magazine the right way. I made a decision quietly and without announcement and built it myself instead. An 800-email campaign across two tracks, personalized pitches to 398 outlets, a separate healthcare outreach campaign, send dates mapped out across three weeks. I didn't tell anyone I'd pivoted. I just pivoted and kept going.

That's not heroism. That's what it looks like when you're overwhelmed and out of options and the work still has to get done. I'm not sure when I stopped being able to tell the difference between resilience and just not stopping. But here I am. Nine days out. Still building.

THE COST

The question isn't whether I'll make it. The question is what it's going to cost me before anyone notices I already burned out.

Here's what this year has actually looked like inside my body and my calendar.

I scheduled a photoshoot for professional photos. The kind a founder of a national publication should have. I didn't make it. I missed my dental cleaning. I missed two follow-up appointments for a condition called hypertension, which, if you've been following along, should surprise exactly no one.

I also have a grant database for the magazine that I haven't finished working through, because the magazine isn't the only thing I'm building. I'm also a playwright. My stage play, a gospel production about Adam and Eve hosting a dinner party, and yes, there is drama, is performing in Charlotte on September 26 with [Big Faith Productions](#). That grant database covers the play too. I am applying for funding for two separate bodies of work while running a

national journalism campaign while managing a VA outreach track while pitching stories while conducting interviews while writing every single word this publication publishes.

I am one person. I have one body. That body has hypertension and missed appointments and a photoshoot that never happened because there wasn't a day that didn't already belong to something else. Building this publication.

I'm also waiting to hear back from a literary agent who responded to my query for a book called *He's the Problem: Why Being Single Beats Settling*. Which brings me to my dating life, or the absence of one. Men have been showing up placing their libidos on my table and informing me that I'm too much to handle. My position is that men today aren't enough for me to slow down long enough to let them catch me. I'm building a national magazine, a stage play, and a book about exactly this. Nobody is catching me. I'm not standing still.

The people watching from the sidelines are waiting to see if I'll make it. I want to ask them: make what, exactly? I'm already here. I'm already doing it. The question isn't whether I'll make it. The question is what it's going to cost me before anyone notices I already burned out.

THE STAKES

I know what publishing this could cost me. I'm certain it will provoke polarized reactions. I published it anyway.

I want to be clear about what I'm doing by saying any of this out loud. I'm exhausted. I feel alone. I've missed doctor's appointments. I'm discouraged.

For a Black woman in this position, that kind of honesty doesn't land the same way it might for someone else. There is no grace period for instability when you're already operating without the institutional backing that would make instability forgivable. Funders look for founders who project certainty. Partners look for operators who don't show cracks. The same publications I'm pitching are now going to read this. The same organizations I'm asking for funding are going to see it. I haven't received a vote of approval yet. I'm still in the room trying to earn one. And I just walked in and told you everything.

This could be professional suicide. I know that. I know what publishing this could cost me. I'm certain it will provoke polarized reactions. Some will see me as a liability. Others will recognize it as the only currency that actually holds: the truth. I published it for the latter.

I'm not interested in managing anyone's perception of me. My professionalism begins and ends with leaving a masterful digital footprint of veterans' legacies. That's the work. There are no masks in completing it. What you see is who I am, someone who shows up fully and without pretense, because anything less would compromise the work itself. If that kind of honesty isn't what you're looking for, this publication may not be the right fit.

But I've spent this entire publication asking veterans to sit across from me and speak from their soul. I've learned that the prepared answers are never the whole story. What lives underneath them, the truths they haven't told anyone, is where the real story begins. And after the interview, they've experienced something most people never get to feel: that vulnerability is their strength.

I've built every piece in this magazine on that belief. Honesty is not a liability. It's the only currency that actually holds. I can't ask that of everyone I interview and then refuse to do it myself.

THE RECORD

Veterans deserve this work. I believe that without qualification. But I've been sitting with a harder question lately: does the work have to come at the cost of everything else? I could keep the platform. Write stories when asked.

Treat it as the serious hobby it would become if the people I'm doing it for don't take it seriously. I don't have to build a sustainable business. I don't have to fight for funding. I don't have to do any of this at the expense of my health, my income, or my peace. That option exists. I'm aware of it. I'm writing this piece instead of taking it.

My late husband was a Gulf War veteran. He was already out when I met him. He came with PTSD. I never got to tell his story the way it deserved to be told. Maybe that's part of why I care so much about making sure other veterans get the chance to tell theirs while they still can.

Here's what I know on the other side of all of that.

This publication is one of a kind. Not as a marketing line. As a fact. There is no competing publication doing long-form narrative journalism about veterans at this level, with this editorial standard, built and run by a single Black woman with no institutional backing. That's not a gap I accidentally filled. That's a gap I built something specific to fill.

The discouragement is real. The exhaustion is real. The isolation is real. And none of it changes what the work is.

I didn't come this far to need anyone's permission to publicly express how I feel. I didn't come this far in life to need your approval to validate me. But I'm writing this because somewhere there is another person building something from nothing, in a lane that wasn't made for them, watching their friends become an audience, sending their best work into silence, and wondering if any of it is worth it.

It is. Keep building. That's my answer and I'm keeping it.

Veteran Excellence Magazine

Camille D. Ford | Founder & Editor-in-Chief | Veteran Excellence Magazine | 704-666-7728 | veteranexcellence@veteranexcellence.org | VeteranExcellence.org

Veteran Excellence Magazine is a fiscally sponsored project of Veterans Collaborative, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.