

KOLAR CONTINUES SERVING AFTER NAVY ‘ADVENTURE’ BECAME FIRST WOMAN APPOINTED WDVA SECRETARY



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More than a decade after her Navy “adventure” concluded, Mary Kolar continues to serve in a different capacity.

Kolar, a 28-year Navy veteran, recently became the first woman appointed as the secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. Gov. Tony Evers announced Kolar’s historic appointment December 28, 2018. One week later, she became the chief advocate for the more than 350,000 military veterans who call Wisconsin home.

“I feel like everything I’ve done in my life led to my appointment,” Kolar, the 11th WDVA secretary, said during an interview.

Kolar grew up in Wilton, Wisconsin, a small town about an hour east of La Crosse. With the example set by her grandfather, father and four brothers – all who served in the military – and a mother who was active in the Auxiliary, Kolar said she desired to “live a life of service.”

With those aspirations, there wasn’t much hesitation when Kolar met a Navy officer recruiter during her final year at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

“I had previously talked about enlisting, but my brothers would discourage me from doing so,” she said. “I was in a business sorority at the time and it was a career day. I talked to a Navy recruiter who said, ‘We’re going to get you in.’ I’ll never forget that.”

Three weeks after her graduation from UW-La Crosse, Kolar was at officer candidate school. Her duties and responsibilities grew over her almost three decades of service, primarily working in education, training and recruiting. Through her service in multiple states, including Virginia, Florida, Rhode Island, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Georgia as well as Washington DC, she always aimed to learn more and become a more effective leader.

“I had tremendous duty stations throughout my 28 years,” Kolar said. “Amongst the most rewarding was as executive officer at the Navy’s only boot camp. Every week, I saw recruits begin their Navy careers as Sailors.”

While on active duty, Kolar earned master’s degrees from the Naval War College and the University of Rhode Island. She retired from the Navy in 2008 as a Captain (O-6). Though she no longer wore a uniform, her goal of living a life of service never wavered.

Kolar moved to Madison with her husband, Scott, who’s also a Navy veteran. The couple has two children, Matthew and Jamie; Matthew serving in the Navy on the U.S.S. Kentucky and Jamie serving as a firefighter in the Town of Delafield.

In addition to serving 14,000 constituents in downtown Madison as a Dane County Supervisor for six years, Kolar oversaw multiple community-based organizations and was the vice president of the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Foundation’s Board of Directors.

Since her first day as WDVA’s secretary, Kolar has been adamant that to accomplish the mission of better serving veterans and their families in Wisconsin, teamwork is a necessity.

“We at the WDVA know we can do more, but that’s only possible by working together with veterans, CVSOs, TVSOs, veterans groups, lawmakers and stakeholders across our state,” she said.

Having served almost six months as WDVA secretary, Kolar said the foundation she laid through her past experiences was more than worthwhile.

“I’d do it all again in a heartbeat,” Kolar said. “The adventure continues as I have the great honor to serve Wisconsin’s veterans and their families.”