

'It Felt Like a Dream'

After accepting the \$35,000 T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship, a high school sophomore from Tennessee explained what motivated him

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When Scotland Stewart sat down to ponder the 2022-23 Voice of Democracy (VOD) audio-essay prompt — “Why is the veteran important?” — the 15-year-old high school sophomore had only to look at his parents.

Raised by Air Force and Navy veterans, who themselves were raised by veterans, the VOD question was a deep and personal introspection on Stewart’s own family ethos.

“Pretty much everyone in my mom and dad’s families served in the military,” said Stewart, who won the 2022-23 VOD top prize, the \$35,000 T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship, in March. “I have followed their example my whole life, so I’ve always had the foundation and understanding of the importance of veterans and their impact on our country.”

The sophomore at Franklin County High School in Winchester, Tennessee, where he serves as a student council president and member of the student advisory committee, began his essay with four powerful words: Honor. Integrity. Loyalty. Service.

“These are simple words to most of us, but to our nation’s veterans, these are their core values in life,” wrote Stewart, whose essay was sponsored by VFW Post 1893 in Estill Springs, Tennessee. “These words sustained them as they defended us.”

Stewart, whose father, Jerry, deployed during Operation Desert Storm, continued his essay by noting how shameful it is that U.S. citizens neglect the sacrifices that men and women in uniform have endured.

“Unfortunately, in America, respect and remembrance of our veterans has declined beyond an acceptable level of where it should be,” Stewart said. “The plight of our veterans, once returning home, is disgraceful.”

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Stewart's essay notes the sobering statistics of veterans succumbing to suicide or homelessness. As a result, he adds, "the percentage of Americans who can claim veteran status has declined from 18 percent in 1980 to 7 percent in 2018."

This last statistic captured in Stewart's winning essay segues into his plea to recognize the importance of veterans and what they've given to the nation.

"These brave men and women fight the battles abroad so that we do not have to fight here at home," Stewart stated. "They provide the very liberty that allows us to enjoy the rights guaranteed in our Constitution, while placing themselves in harm's way to do so."

Ending his essay with a reiteration of the four pillars that have been instilled in him by the veterans in his own life, Stewart drove the point home.

"Veterans of the U.S. military are important because they risked their lives on the battlefield so that we can safely live ours in the shadows of peace," Stewart said. "In return, we owe them that same honor, integrity, loyalty and service we received from them."

'I NEVER GAVE UP'

Stewart submitted his powerful audio-essay for consideration before the deadline in October last year, joining more than 26,000 VOD contest participants whose essays all painted a unique picture on the importance of veterans.

When he was later short-listed and then selected to represent the VFW Department of Tennessee after winning at the state level, the thought that this might be his year was planted.

"I had been applying since my English teacher in the seventh grade gave us copies of the VFW's Patriot's Pen contest form to fill out," Stewart said of the national program for middle school students. "As the years went on, I kept applying. I never gave up."

As had been customary in years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Stewart joined the other 52 VFW Department VOD winners for the national finals in Washington, D.C.

Arriving on March 4 in Arlington, Virginia, the VOD finalists spent a couple of days sightseeing prior to the highly anticipated Parade of Winners, the event at which the national winners are announced. The tour of sites was hosted and funded by VFW and the program's title sponsor, Twisted X.

Since partnering in 2019, Twisted X's sponsorships of VOD and Patriot's Pen programs have helped thousands of student participants receive scholarships. The partnership helped raise more than

\$1.3 million for VOD winners in 2022-23 alone, as well as nearly \$780,000 toward Patriot's Pen winners.

"VFW is encouraging and providing a platform for young adults to express their feelings about various patriotic themes," said Prasad Reddy, Twisted X president and CEO. "I feel that this is truly a great experience for these young adults, and it is an honor and privilege for us to be a partner in this unique program with VFW."

From Arlington National Cemetery and the Holocaust Museum to Mount Vernon and the National Mall, Stewart and the other 52 finalists followed a schedule that afforded them access to hallowed ground, where veterans are honored and memorialized for their sacrifices.

"It was absolutely amazing," Stewart said. "I had been to D.C. in the past, but getting to experience it with kids from everywhere made it extra special. It led to some unbreakable bonds for sure."

Having toured for a couple of days and making friends along the way, Stewart and the 52 other VOD finalists came together for the Parade of Winners on March 6 at the Regency Ballroom at the Hyatt Crystal City in Arlington.

'IT'S AN ABSOLUTE HONOR'

The Parade of Winners was held in front of thousands of VFW delegates in town for the annual Legislative Conference in the nation's capital, which ran from March 5-9.

As the final three names were called by Jr. Vice Commander-in-Chief Al Lipphardt, narrowing down to the T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship, Stewart recalled the nerves gripping him.

When his name finally rolled off the mic and echoed across the Regency Ballroom, Stewart basked in the moment by accepting his top prize with an incandescent smile and a firm handshake from VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland.

"It was unreal," Stewart said. "Getting to fly out to D.C. was already a huge deal. But when they began nailing it down by names, my heart was going crazy. Then they called first place, and I just couldn't believe it. It felt like a dream."

After accepting the \$35,000 award from VFW and Twisted X, Stewart approached the podium to read his winning essay in front of the large crowd made up of VFW delegates.

"Well, it is an absolute honor to be up here tonight," began Stewart, who plans to use his scholarship toward a degree in economics or political science. "I can't believe this is happening. I want to

thank every person for coming out here tonight. I want to congratulate every person on stage here tonight.”

Like a person poised for large crowds, Stewart commanded center stage as he recited his essay to those in the audience, who gave him a standing ovation following the final sentence, an homage to all veterans living by those very four words — Honor. Integrity. Loyalty. Service.

Stewart’s speech was followed by 2023 Patriot’s Pen first-place winner Leighton Peters, a seventh-grader from Rice Lake, Wisconsin, who received the \$5,000 Paul A. Spera Past Commander-in-Chief Award.

Peters’ winning essay, sponsored by VFW Post 2204 in Rice Lake, was themed “My Pledge to Our Veterans,” and received another standing ovation.

‘EXTREMELY BLESSED BY YOUR SUPPORT’

Returning to his hometown of Winchester, about 90 miles southeast of Nashville, Tennessee, Stewart was welcomed as the national VOD winner, an honor he was quick to share.

“My town has supported me, my school and school principal have all supported me,” Stewart said. “I miss the people in D.C. a lot, but I’ve enjoyed coming back to my hometown and sharing this honor with them.”

As for the friends he made during the Voice of Democracy national finals, Stewart continues to keep in touch with them. The sophomore, who admitted that the new scholarship has afforded him the chance to expand his college options, will see those new friends again in mid-June.

Customary for VOD winners, VFW is sending the 53 winners of the contest to the renowned Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, for an interactive history lesson that runs from June 15-18.

Stewart also has been extended an invitation to attend Twisted X’s awards dinner on June 27 as an honorary guest.

“I’m very grateful for what has become one of the best experiences of my life,” Stewart said. “Everyone at VFW [and contest sponsor Twisted X], from the national level down to the local, I am extremely blessed by your support.”

This article is featured in the 2023 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.