

Gwen Cherne - Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner 11 October 2023

Gwen Cherne was appointed the inaugural Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner for the Repatriation Commission on 6 August 2020 and later appointed a member of the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission.

Gwen is acutely aware of the challenges that defence families face from her own experience as a War Widow with two young children having lost her husband to suicide. She is the daughter of a Vietnam Veteran and the mother of a current serving ADF member.



Gwen was involved in the Royal Commission into Veteran Suicide and noted we needed to build a system with families at the forefront. Part of her submission was that ADF families were still disadvantaged and suffered the same issues since the Hamlin Report of 1986.

Under the leadership of Liz Cosson, the department began to understand that effects of service life were felt by many more than just the veteran. Gwen's current role provides a strong voice for families of retired and serving veterans to government – she is dedicated in providing hope and healing through co-designed and co-implemented solutions.

Gwen has a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and a Masters Degree in Public Administration (with a major in International Policy) from New York University.

Born in the USA – Gwen's career has taken her all over the world including Afghanistan, Africa, Central and South America, the Caribbean and Australia working on stability and relief to the development of youth, women and families living in crisis and extreme poverty.

In her early career, Gwen co-founded a school for low-income children in the borough of Brooklyn NY.

She has worked on and off in Afghanistan as an International Development Worker in the central and south regions and as a Regional Director, both in and out of the relative security of military compounds on projects between 2006 and 2010 in Kandahar, Jalalabad and other locations. Gwen met her husband in 2008 – SGT Peter Café (Australian Commando) whilst working in Kabul.

Gwen said, "Families were at home when you served and were there when you got home – Families are dedicated supports naturally, however are no longer addons or after thoughts".

Gwen has worked as a Senior Trainer and Manager for Curriculum and Military Training for Military, Foreign Service Officers and other Civilians preparing for deployment.

Gwen noted, we have an interest in Veteran's children, if we don't know where they are – we cannot support them. Gwen further mentioned the pilot program in Townsville where employment of Veteran Families and their adult children was occurring.

Gwen said as a Widow of Veteran Suicide, we need to support families who experience death or our children may follow and these mental health issues may not go away for decades. Families should get serious support to address trauma, grief and post-traumatic stress.

Gwen is committed to representing the perspectives of veteran families in ongoing policy and decision-making across Government.

Estimated prevalence of suicidality (ideation, planning, attempting) in Transitioned ADF

- Just over 20 per cent of Transitioned ADF experienced suicidal ideation, plans or attempts in the last 12 months.
- 28.9% of Transitioned ADF had felt that their life was not worth living.
- 21.2% had felt so low that they thought about taking their own life.
- 7.9% of Transitioned ADF had made a suicide plan.
- 2.0% of Transitioned ADF reported having attempted suicide.

Source: Mental Health & Transition Study (Aust Govt 2018).
https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/twrp_mhpr.pdf

Since the death of her husband to suicide in 2017 she has dedicated herself to advocacy for Australian war widows, Defence and Veteran families, suicide prevention and mental health awareness.

Gwen was appointed to the Council of the Australian War Memorial in 2019, was an inaugural Member of the Council for Women and Families United by Defence Service, served on the board of the Australian War Widow' NSW chapter, was an Ambassador for the Commando Welfare Trust and Gotcha4Life and was a 2018 Invictus Games Ambassador for Clubs NSW.

"I am proud to be the Veteran Family Advocate Commissioner and to be charged with ensuring the voice of veterans' families are heard," Gwen says.

"As the widow and mother of veterans I am very passionate about this work and the important role that families play in Australia's veteran support system.

There is so much we can, and should, learn from families and I will make sure we do." Gwen Cherne.

(Dept Veteran Affairs Website - 2023).



L-R: Roger W Greene, Gwen Churne, Michael Annett – MCC Military Veterans Group Luncheon – Wed 11 Oct 2023.