Building community, one act of service at a time

by Bobbie Smith Bryant

MURRAY - A local force for good, Murray's Donna (Grogan) Herndon, was recently recognized with the Medal of Honor by the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution. This rare honor is given to Americans whose lives show true patriotism, leadership, and service.

Reared locally, she was raised in a Christian home by Leon and Virgil Grogran, setting the course for Donna's life. Those early lessons, where kindness, patience, and responsibility were daily expectations, shaped the little girl who would become one of Calloway County's most influential civic leaders today.

In her youth, she learned common sense, sound judgment, and the importance of doing what is right. She later admired these character traits in others and strove to emulate them. Even as a child, she was drawn to helping people, and she carried that instinct with her into adulthood.

Donna's civic-mindedness expanded dramatically when she married Woody Herndon and entered the world of military service. His career took them from Fort Knox and Fort Bragg to Fort Stewart, Fort Rucker, and eventually to Berlin during the Cold War. While Woody trained and flew missions, Donna became a force of compassion and organization.

In Berlin, she volunteered thousands of hours with the Red Cross, the Berlin Army Hospital, and the American Women's Club, where she helped establish the Army Community Service after witnessing young military wives living in hardship. Many were unauthorized to be in Berlin, struggling financially, and raising children alone while their husbands served.

Donna refused to ignore their suffering. After visiting one home where the only food was a box of instant potatoes until payday, she went home and emptied her pantry. At the next board meeting she declared, "We are American women, and if we don't look out for these young women, lightning should strike us."

Her advocacy reached the Commanding General, who gathered all American wives and reminded them that none of them carried rank—they were equals, responsible for one another. Donna's leadership earned her two nominations for Berlin's Military Wife of the Year and a formal commendation recognizing her "distinguished and devoted service."

When the Herndons returned to Fort Knox, Donna's patriotism took on new dimensions. Under General Donn A. Starry, she helped shape what became Army Community Services, a program designed to strengthen military families. Starry believed military families deserved democratic participation, so he created elected "mayors" for each housing community. Donna was appointed to fill an unfinished term—but only after she made one condition clear: "If you give me a platform to do something about the commissary, then I'll accept."

She fought to restore essential supplies—diapers, baby food, toiletries—that an interim commander had removed. Her advocacy led to immediate reform. When elections came, she won the mayoral seat, even against a candidate named Walter Reed.

Donna later said, "When you volunteer your time, there is no limit to what you can do—especially if you have support from the top."

Her years at Fort Knox taught her how to lead, organize, and serve without hesitation.

When Donna and Woody returned to Murray, she brought her military-honed leadership home with her. She worked in juvenile justice, helped reduce court appearances for students, and collaborated on legislation to protect missing and exploited children.

Then, Murray State University reached out to her. When she became Alumni Director during a tough time of conflict and transition, she made it clear from the beginning that she wanted to "do this job and do it correctly." Over 11 years, she started new alumni chapters, helped create the Student Ambassador Program, brought back Century Club fundraising, and changed Homecoming by starting Tent City. This new idea broke tradition but soon became one of MSU's favorite events.

She built national connections, organized major alumni gatherings, and even secured support from prominent graduates like Bob Burton, who funded scholarships and the Hall of Champions. Donna also developed the Golden Horseshoe Award to honor dedicated alumni. Her tenure was marked by innovation, relationship building, and a deep love for Murray State, all of which helped shape the university's modern alumni culture.

Donna's life was forever changed by the loss of her son, Roger. An aerospace engineering major at West Point, he was killed in a 1991 training accident there. It was a grief so deep it reshaped her days and redirected her purpose. His death left a silence in her home that she could hardly bear, especially when she found herself surrounded by young people his age at Murray State.

"I knew I needed a change," she said, remembering how even routine moments on campus became reminders of the future Roger would never have.

In her grief, she began to look for signs of comfort, and she found them—most memorably in the Monarch butterflies that seemed to appear at the exact moments she needed strength. She came to see them as gentle messages from Roger, reminders that love endures.

Out of her heartache grew a fund in his name, designed not as a scholarship but as a way to help young people who needed opportunities, support, or simply a chance.

"Roger always wanted to help people," she said, and through that fund—and through her renewed commitment to serving her community—Donna ensured that her son's generous spirit continues to touch lives long after his passing.



Photos provided

Herndon was accompanied to Washington, DC by her daughter and son-in-law, Melissa and David Schiele, and five DAR members of the local Captain Wendell Oury Chapter who were responsible for nominating Herndon for this award. From left, Calloway County DAR President Kathy Timmons, Donna Herndon, Melissa Schiele; back row, Mary Anne Medlock, Brenda Call and Pat Seiber.



The DAR Medal of Honor presented to Herndon.

The most important project began when a child told Donna that her mother "couldn't afford for her to be sick anymore this year." That moment inspired Donna and others to start the Angels Community Clinic, which ensured working families could access medical care. St. Johns' Episcopal Church later approached her to initiate Angels Attic, a thrift shop that supported the clinic for nearly two decades. Working together, they secured donations, volunteers, and even a building—turning a simple idea into a million-dollar community engine.

Donna's civic mindedness grew into a network of programs that transformed Calloway County:

- CUBS (Calloway United Benevolent Services), uniting 130+ agencies in a shared mission
- The Santa Project, providing Christmas support for families

CASA of Calloway County, where she wrote the first $50,000 grant

- The Homeless Coalition, now merged with Gentry House and part of HOPE Calloway, to address housing insecurity
- The Calloway County Alliance for Substance Abuse Prevention
- The Enduring Hope Campaign, ensuring a regional cancer center remains in Calloway County

Because of her service, Donna has been recognized many times over the years. Some of her awards include the Rotary Humanitarian of the Year, Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year, Murray Woman's Club Volunteer of the Year, United Way Volunteer of the Year, the MSU Golden Horseshoe Award, and the Kathie Gentry Lifetime Achievement Award. She was also honored by Murray State University in the establishment of the Donna Herndon Award for Civic Engagement, and CASA created the Donna Herndon Lifetime Achievement Award.

Donna Herndon's leadership and patriotism are lived and felt. It is seen in the families she helped to feed in Berlin, the military communities that were strengthened at Fort Knox, the children she and others protected in Calloway County, and the thousands of people who have received medical care, clothing, housing, or hope because she and many others refused to look away.

Respected as a community builder and a quiet force for good, she is a living tribute to the values the DAR Medal of Honor seeks to honor. Her purpose-filled life proves that civic-mindedness is not a single act—it is a lifetime of choosing to serve others. ■

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