



## OVL Charity



Dr. Desh  
Nendze

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### "Forward March, Inc. Winning the Battle Within"

- By Christina Parker

In the military community, mental health struggles often happen silently and in plain sight. Service members and families push through deployments, relocations, fractured routines, and emotional strain while carrying the expectation to stay resilient, composed, and mission-ready. For Dr. Desh Nendze — For Dr. Desh Nendze—veteran, military spouse, clinical psychologist, and founder of Forward March, Inc. — this reality is more than an academic subject. It's personal.



Long before she founded the nonprofit, Desh lived the challenges she now works to solve. In her previous marriage, her husband suffered from PTSD, yet the therapists available to them didn't understand the military culture well enough to help. "I felt like they just listened to our Army stories," she recalls. The experience left an impact, and when the marriage ended, she made a vow: she would find a way to fix the problem for other military families. That promise led her to enlist in the Army at age 37, pursue a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, serve nine years in uniform, and ultimately dedicate her life to strengthening the mental, emotional, and relational health of service members and veterans.

Forward March was built from every angle of Desh's identity — as a veteran, as a military spouse, and as a psychologist specializing in military mental health. She understands the pressures on both sides of the uniform, the sense of duty that competes with personal well-being, and the layers of stigma that still surround asking for help. In addition to running the nonprofit, she teaches Military Psychology at Norfolk State University, contributes to military mental-health research, serves as the Chaplain at American Legion Tidewater Post #327, volunteers at local colleges and churches as a mental health wellness coach, and leads multiple community mental-health efforts. Her life's work orbits one mission: help military members and families win the battle within.



Desh's family stands behind the nonprofit as well. Her husband — a Navy veteran — played a crucial role in her own military journey, and today he serves, along with her grown children, on Forward March's Board of Directors. They provide support, grounding, and encouragement as she balances the demands of running a young nonprofit with an already full professional life.

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At the heart of Forward March is a simple, powerful philosophy captured in its tagline: “Win the Battle Within.” To Desh, that phrase represents the hidden internal struggles most service members carry — trauma, guilt, high operational tempo, family strain, identity shifts, and the cultural expectation to hold everything together. Her organization approaches mental health without stigma, offering support in an environment where no one is treated as weak, broken, or a problem to fix. Whether faith-based or non-faith-based, every program is designed to meet people where they are and give them a path to healing that they feel ready and comfortable to take.

Forward March operates on three pillars: Education, Camaraderie, and Wellness. Education arms service members with the skills and language they often never received — tools for transitions, coping strategies, career development, and understanding military trauma. Camaraderie breaks through the isolation that so many veterans experience by gathering people into events, workshops, classes, and community moments that reconnect them with others who understand. And Wellness focuses on the whole person — spirit, mind, and body — ensuring that those seeking help are supported holistically rather than in fragmented ways.

One of the most important decisions in the organization’s model is keeping services accessible without threatening job security for active-duty members. Forward March offers peer-to-peer support that doesn’t involve clinical notes or licensing risk. When someone needs a higher level of care, they are connected discreetly to trusted mental-health partners who can provide formal therapy while preserving the service member’s privacy and career.

The nonprofit’s offerings have grown to include peer counseling, support groups, life coaching, suicide-prevention trainings, community day events, workshops, and presentations. Most people begin by attending a class or event, slowly building trust before stepping into one-on-one support. Forward March also facilitates Reboot Recovery’s Bulletproof Marriage course — a faith-based program addressing the relationship strain that so many military couples face. With repeated relationship challenges showing up in her work, Desh is committed to helping couples find stability before crises escalate.

Outreach remains one of the toughest challenges. Many service members hesitate to seek support, so Desh focuses on showing up in military environments, building relationships, and letting the community see who she is and what she stands for. Trust is always the starting point.

Because the needs are constant, prioritizing services can be difficult. Desh helps whoever comes to her first — whether they need short-term support, relationship guidance, or even emergency funds for food or shelter when the weather turns cold. She also taps into her network to bring in additional help when necessary. “The military is small but mighty,” she says. “We’re all in this together.”

Like many small nonprofits, Forward March operates entirely on donations. Fundraising is an ongoing battle, but Desh is undeterred. She’s building recurring donor support, pursuing grants, forming partnerships, and finding creative ways to generate revenue. One of the newest efforts is her work as an Independent Travel Agent, where 100% of travel-booking commissions go directly to Forward March. “If

the money is going to a company anyway," she explains, "why not have it support a nonprofit helping military families?"

The hardest challenge so far has been visibility — simply letting the community know Forward March exists. But despite launching just in August 2024, the organization has already made meaningful strides. When classes draw only one participant or none at all, Desh sees it not as a failure but as direction. "Sometimes God only brings me the one person who needs me," she says. "Or He gives me a moment to rest."

Carrying the weight of others' trauma could easily take a toll, but Desh practices what she teaches. Her background in clinical psychology, along with mindfulness, yoga, faith, and spiritual disciplines, helps her maintain resilience and emotional grounding.

Looking ahead 5–10 years, her vision is bold: a dedicated Ocean View facility offering counseling, yoga, nutrition support, camaraderie events, gardening, nature activities, and collaboration spaces for other military mental-health nonprofits — a true holistic wellness hub for the military community.

Her advice for veterans, spouses, or clinicians dreaming of starting something similar is direct: "Develop the relationships. It's all about camaraderie, community, trust. Be genuine, be confidential, do good work, and let things take time."

And if there is one thing she wishes civilians understood better, it's the sheer magnitude of what military families carry — the constant adjustments, the lack of control, the cultural pressure to stay composed, and the emotional whiplash of transitioning back into civilian life. A simple "Thank you for your service" still matters deeply.

Forward March exists to make sure those who serve aren't fighting their battles alone. Through education, connection, and compassionate support, Dr. Desh Nendze is working to transform the mental-health landscape for military families in Hampton Roads — one relationship, one conversation, and one battle within at a time.

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