

## Dedicated Certified Volunteer Advocate Helps Veteran Make a Better Home

It's a lively weekday morning in December 2024 at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home. Mohammed Didin — a relatively new resident of the Vineland nursing home — has already attended a group activity, *Music with Christina*, and is now in the dining room, visiting with Doshia Melroy, a Certified Volunteer Advocate (CVA) with the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman (LTCO).



Doshia has made a special trip to check in with Mohammed. Until October 2024, he lived at a nursing home in Burlington County that Doshia visits regularly as part of her volunteer advocacy with the LTCO.

Things were different there. The Burlington County nursing home was not a great fit for Mohammed. The available activities didn't especially interest him, and he was not receiving the level of physical therapy that he needed. Mohammed spent most of his time alone in his room, watching cowboy movies on TV. He rarely left his bed — not even for meals.

Doshia was a new CVA when she first knocked on his door at the Burlington County nursing home. Mohammed waved her inside, but he was reserved. They seemed to have little in common until they got to talking about music, especially “the oldies” — the Motown and early Rock n' Roll hits of the 1950s and early 1960s. They bonded over Little Richard.

### ***Every Long-Term Care Resident Has a Story...***

Mohammed is one of those men who doesn't talk much at first, which is a shame because he has seen more than his share and has stories to tell.

He grew up in Springfield, Pa., during the 1940s and 1950s, and was a standout football player in high school. He credits chopping wood for his uncle all summer with giving him a physical edge.

After high school, he joined the U.S. Air Force. It was 1961 when Mohammed, not quite 20 years old, shipped out to his first post in England as an Air Force flight engineer.

The Cold War was raging. The Berlin Wall went up that summer; the Cuban Missile Crisis would happen the following year. From England, Mohammed's unit moved to a base in France. French soldiers in the area were mainly headed to or from Algeria, where rebels were waging a war of independence from France.

Back home, civil rights activists met violent resistance as they worked to end segregation. The stateside tensions reverberated in the military, Mohammed said, with Black airmen, sailors, and soldiers often facing harassment or violence from fellow service members. Mohammed says he felt more welcome in the Algerian bar near his base than the bar frequented by Americans.

Mohammed left the service and attended Cheyney University, graduating in 1975 — “with honors,” he proudly adds, a half-century later. At some point, he joined the legendary Wheels of Soul motorcycle club. Then he found his way back to the service as an Air Reserve Technician, or ART, a full-time civilian employee of the Air Force Reserves who also holds a military rank in their unit. Mohammed and his unit deployed to the Persian Gulf area in the early 2000s. All told, Mohammed had served 31 years in the Air Force when he retired for good.

Age and chronic health conditions took a toll on his body. After both of his legs were amputated, Mohammed needed more care than his longtime companion, Frieda, could provide. So he moved to a nursing home in Burlington County that was close enough for Frieda to visit. Sadly, Frieda died of COVID in 2023, leaving him shocked and bereft. She was his only visitor. Mohammed has an older sister in Pennsylvania, but she cannot travel.



Doshia knew none of this history that first time she knocked on Mohammed's door. She only knew that it seemed he could use someone to take the time to listen to him. As a CVA, Doshia is trained and certified to engage with residents and, with consent, advocate on their behalf to address issues in the nursing home. But Mohammed didn't have just one issue with the Burlington County nursing home. He only lived there to be close to Frieda. Now, he wanted out of the place entirely.

Mohammed had a good experience in a VA hospital in Coatesville, Pa., years back, and he believed one of New Jersey's state-run Veterans Homes would be a good fit for him. Doshia took on the challenge to help him navigate the time-consuming, intensive admission process for the Veterans Memorial Home.

It took about a year and half, but they got it done. He moved to the Vineland home in October 2024.

Doshia still visits occasionally, but mainly for social calls. The LTCO has another Certified Volunteer Advocate, Denise Kues, who regularly visits the Veterans Home and is a resource to Mohammed and his fellow residents.



### ***Back to that weekday morning in December—***

The Veterans Home staff is setting up the dining room for lunch. Mohammed, Doshia, and another visitor are at a table at the far end of the room.

The physical therapist who works with Mohammed stops by to say hello and check on his grip strength, which they have been working on in rehab. The physical therapist sees Mohammed three times a week at Vineland, a vast improvement from his former home.

The Veterans Home social worker stops by and talks to Doshia. They are working to get Mohammed's benefits transferred from the Burlington County nursing home. The social worker says she will follow up if they don't hear an update in the next several days.

As noon closes in, other residents populate the dining room. Doshia and the other visitor leave Mohammed to enjoy his midday meal.

One last look back: He is sharing laughs over lunch with two fellow veterans.