

# A life of service: How ASU's Cheryl Schmidt turned duty into a legacy

**The Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame inductee has served as an Army nurse, an advocate and an educator**

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News  
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When [Cheryl Schmidt](#) was a little girl in rural Ohio, she would watch her mother dress for work —crisp white uniform, nursing cap perched perfectly in place. Her mother had been a nurse and taught cadet nurses during World War II. To young Cheryl, she wasn't just a caregiver — she was a symbol of dignity and strength.

"I always wanted to be like Mom," said Schmidt, a clinical professor at Arizona State University's [Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation](#). "I said, 'I'm going to be a nurse just like her.'"

That promise became the foundation of a life of service spanning five decades: as a U.S. Army nurse, as an educator shaping generations of students, and as an advocate ensuring veterans and nurses alike receive the recognition and resources they deserve.

On Oct. 24, at age 76, Schmidt was inducted into the [Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame](#), joining 23 others honored for service beyond their military careers. For her, it's more than a medal. It's a recognition of a lifetime spent answering the call — whether from the Army, the Red Cross or the nursing students she continues to mentor today at Edson College.

"Dr. Schmidt personifies the highest standards of civic and veteran volunteer spirit expected of nominees for the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame," said [Lisa Jaurigue](#), a clinical associate professor at Edson College who nominated Schmidt to the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame Selection Committee. "As a nurse of 55 years, she continues to serve civilian and veteran communities. In her career thus far, she has been nominated for or awarded 66 awards."

**The call to serve**

Schmidt joined the Army in 1974, in the shadow of the Vietnam War.

“I actually signed up to go to Vietnam,” she said. “But there was a waiting list of nurses. Can you believe that? So I joined the reserves and stayed in.”

It was in the reserves where she built her military career teaching medics, coordinating national disaster drills and eventually rising to lieutenant colonel during Operation Desert Storm. Her family history made service feel inevitable: Her father was in the Army, her brother served in the Navy and her mother was a cadet nurse educator.

But her path almost took a very different turn. As a teenager, Schmidt interviewed to become a nun.

“They asked me if I had ever dated, and I said no because all the nice boys were going steady,” she said, laughing. “The nun told me, ‘Go date for a year and then come back.’ Instead, I went to nursing school. And I never went back.”

## **Leadership in uniform**

From her earliest days in uniform, Schmidt found herself in leadership roles. She already held a master’s degree when she joined, and the Army wasted no time putting her skills to use.

She taught medics for six years, coordinated mock battlefield drills with soldiers covered in fake wounds, and even handled helicopter evacuations using radio codes.

“It was basically leadership from day one,” she said.

When Desert Storm erupted in 1990, Schmidt prepared to deploy overseas with her unit as assistant chief nurse. But an injury while moving heavy boxes left her with permanent back damage. Instead of Saudi Arabia, she was sent to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where she spent six months running the pediatric unit.

“It was bittersweet,” she admitted. “I had survivor guilt. I didn’t get to Vietnam. I didn’t get to Saudi Arabia. But at Walter Reed, I cared for children of military families from all over the world. I saw diseases I’d only read about in textbooks. It made me a better teacher when I came home.”

## **From battlefield to classroom**

Schmidt never stopped teaching. For over 51 years, she has taught at programs in Ohio, Michigan, North Dakota, Arkansas and now Arizona. Her specialty became community health and disaster nursing. These are fields that many students initially overlook but that she makes come alive with real-world stories.

“I tell my students, ‘You may want ICU glory, but if you send a patient home without proper support, and they’re readmitted within 30 days, Medicare won’t pay,’” she says. “That gets their attention.”

Her philosophy is rooted in action. Schmidt was living in Arkansas when the state took in 70,000 evacuees after Hurricane Katrina. Only five nurses in the state were trained in Red Cross disaster shelters. Schmidt trained 180 more almost overnight, then began integrating disaster preparedness into nursing curricula nationwide.

Since 2009, she estimates she has trained more than 20,000 nursing students in disaster response.

“You have to be able to think on the fly,” she said. “Sometimes you have no resources. You just show up, and there you are.”

## **A champion for veterans**

Schmidt’s advocacy doesn’t end with nursing. As a disabled veteran herself, she has fought to make sure others like her get the care and recognition they deserve. She currently serves on the [American Academy of Nursing’s Expert Panel on Military and Veterans Health](#), where she helped launch the national campaign “[Have You Ever Served?](#)”, which encourages health care providers to ask patients about military service so they can better diagnose and treat conditions linked to exposures such as Agent Orange and burn pits.

She also champions recognition for those who have been overlooked, especially nurses. More recently, Schmidt has been lobbying Congress to award World War II nurses the Congressional Gold Medal. Many, she points out, stayed behind during the Bataan Death March in the Philippines, choosing to care for soldiers even at the cost of their lives.

“Nobody recognizes them,” she says. “And yet they gave everything.”

## **Facing hard truths**

As a woman in uniform, Schmidt also saw firsthand the challenges that women veterans continue to face, from harassment to systemic underestimation. She recalls turning down unwanted advances from commanders and fellow soldiers alike.

“A lot of women weren’t so lucky,” Schmidt said.

Her doctoral work examined women’s roles in the military. Her conclusion is that service should be based on physical ability, not gender. Women, she argues, bring strengths from communications to leadership that are just as vital as physical muscle.

“As a nurse educator, Cheryl has spent the last five decades sharing her immense knowledge and experience and has inspired thousands of nurses,” said [Wanda Wright](#), director of ASU’s [Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement](#). “Her service to veterans both as an Army veteran herself and through disaster and public health initiatives reminds us how important the profession of care can be.”

## **The heart of a teacher**

If there is a single thread through Schmidt's life, it is mentorship. She takes special pride in lifting up young nurses. People like Elizabeth Wakefield, the ASU student she guided from a first-term novice to state president of the Student Nurses' Association of Arizona, now winning national awards.

"My mantra is, 'You're not a professional nurse unless you belong to a professional organization,'" Schmidt said. "Otherwise, you're just a clock-puncher. Leadership matters."

Even today, she brings that philosophy into the classroom, telling stories that blend military precision with human compassion. Her students, she notes, consistently give her top ratings not because the coursework is easy, but because she makes it matter.

"Dr. Schmidt has played a pivotal role in shaping not only my education but also my professional and personal growth," Wakefield said. "She has taught me to persevere through the challenges of nursing school, to pursue leadership roles and to seize opportunities for growth, such as presenting at national conventions, publishing, volunteering in the community and building disaster-preparedness skills."

"She leads by example, showing up with a smile, dedicating herself to service and encouraging every student to achieve more than they thought was possible. ... Personally, I can say with certainty that I would not be the nursing leader I am today without Dr. Schmidt's mentorship."

**I've always felt proud to be an Army nurse. And if my story can help others, then it's worth telling.**

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**Cheryl Schmidt**  
ASU clinical professor

## **A near-death perspective**

Perhaps Schmidt's drive comes from a moment when she almost lost everything. As a nursing student, she underwent surgery for a bowel tumor and nearly died from infection.

"I was in the corner of the room, looking down at my body," she recalled. "I thought, 'Oh, that's me down there.' It wasn't scary. It didn't hurt. It was actually kind of peaceful."

Schmidt survived, but the experience left her determined never to waste the time she was given.

"Life is a gift," she said.

## **Recognition at last**

For decades, Schmidt poured herself into her work with little thought of recognition. That's why this year's induction into the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame feels so special.

"This is the first state I've lived in that honors veterans this way," Schmidt said. "I never even knew it existed until a colleague told me to apply. To be chosen is humbling."

"Our WAC-Army Women United Chapter 68 was pleased to have Dr. Schmidt join us," said Gabe Forsberg, corresponding secretary for the WAC – Army Women United. "Her dedication to her profession and military service was exemplary and exactly the kind of person who deserves to be honored by the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame.

"Cheryl is always thinking of ways to help veterans, and has the unique skills and contacts to bring about positive change. We are delighted to call her our Army sister, and she serves as a true inspiration."

True to form, Schmidt doesn't see the honor as hers alone. She sees it as another platform and a way to elevate the work of nurses, veterans and students.

"I've always felt proud to be an Army nurse," she said. "And if my story can help others, then it's worth telling."

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## **Main image**



ASU Clinical Professor Cheryl Schmidt talks about her military service with her Community Health Nursing students in Sands Hall on the West Valley campus. She has been a nurse for 55 years, including a role as a U.S. Army nurse; is an advocate for veterans and nurses to receive recognition and resources; and has been an instructor on disaster preparedness to more than 20,000 nursing students nationwide. In October, Schmidt was inducted into the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame, joining 23 others honored for service beyond their military careers. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

**Text image(s)**





Cheryl Schmidt (center) is inducted into the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame on Oct. 24, standing alongside Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs (left) and John F. Scott II, director, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services. Photo by Brenda Morris/Edson College



Clinical Professor Cheryl Schmidt displays her 1991 Desert Storm portrait and a couple of hats honoring her military service. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News





Clinical Professor Cheryl Schmidt instructs students in her Community Health Nursing class on the West Valley campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News