



JOSEPH GEETER, III

The **MARLOWE SHERWOOD MEMORIAL SERVICE AWARD** recognizes Park University alumni volunteer service to the community and/or civic organizations.

Born and raised on the south side of Chicago, his life took an unexpected turn when his best friend joined the U.S. Marine Corps and showed up on his doorstep — in uniform. From then on, his mind was made up. “The values of the Marine Corps — honor, courage and commitment — resonate with me every day. They’re core values for my life,” said Joseph (Joe) H. Geeter III, ‘99.

After serving tours in Japan, Korea, Thailand and the Philippines, Geeter, a retired Marine master gunnery sergeant, decided to lead the charge to preserve the national legacy of the Montford Point Marines — the first black Americans to serve in the Marine Corps.

FIRST TO SERVE

In 1941, after President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered black American recruits to be allowed to enlist in the Marine Corps, an estimated 19,000 trained at the newly established segregated camp, known as Montford Point, at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

In spite of rampant racism and discrimination, the Montford Point Marines demonstrated loyalty, hard work and a willingness to serve a nation that, at the time, did not offer them many basic civil rights. They fought in the bloodiest battles of the Pacific, including Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Saipan, Guam, Tinian and Peleliu. “Montford Pointers proved themselves in battle and they proved themselves as American citizens,” said Geeter, past president of the Montford Point Marine Association, about his decision to pursue recognition for these unsung national heroes with the highest civilian honor bestowed by Congress — the Congressional Gold Medal.

CONQUERING CONGRESS

Geeter quickly discovered the daunting realities of his goal. “I had no idea this honor would require that

I write and pass a bill, but I was determined to figure it out.” Just two pages long, the bill took him most of a weekend to write. “The facts, dates, spelling — everything had to be right. My Park education came in handy.”

Geeter credits his 25-year military career for preparing him for nearly every challenge in life, including Washington, D.C. He spent countless hours walking the halls of Congressional office buildings looking for “targets of opportunity” — his military term for catching influential people to ask for their support of his bill.

His perseverance paid off. On Oct. 25, 2011, the bill came up for a vote in the House of Representatives. Geeter remembers watching the vote on C-SPAN. “I watched it like it was the Super Bowl,” he said. The final vote was 422 to zero. “Five years of hard work came down to a 5-minute vote. It was incredible.”

On Nov. 23, 2011, President Barack Obama signed the bill into law. On June 27, 2012, the Congressional Gold Medal was presented to approximately 400 Montford Point Marines during a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

When he’s not advocating for veterans, the former Park Board of Trustees member is a corporate human resources manager at AmeriGas Propane Inc. in King of Prussia, Pa., where he’s worked for 17 years.

Geeter’s can-do spirit inspires all who are fortunate to benefit from his life wisdom: “Believe in yourself. There are people who want you to be successful. Find them. They’re out there. And always look for ways to serve others.”

