
Commander Zeita Merchant, PhD

Commander Zeita Merchant, PhD, is currently the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Chicago and has served on active duty in the Coast Guard for more than 20 years. She was previously Special Assistant to the Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard, and has also held the positions of Executive Officer of Marine Safety Unit Texas City, Supervisor, Port of Miami Field Office, and Chief of Port Operations at US Coast Guard Sector Miami. From 2010 to 2012, Commander Merchant served as a Congressional Fellow in the US House of Representatives. She graduated with honors from Tougaloo College with a Bachelor of Science in Biology, and received her Master of Quality Systems Management from the National Graduate School in 2003, her Master of Public Administration from the Trachtenberg School in 2010, and her Doctorate in Business Administration from the National Graduate School in 2011. Commander Merchant has been honored with many professional, academic, and community service awards throughout her career, including no less than eleven medals for her service in the Coast Guard, and is a recognized authority in the field of Marine Safety, Emergency, and Environmental Management.

Policy Perspectives: You're currently the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Chicago. Can you tell us a little bit about what that position entails and what your role within that unit is?

Zeita Merchant: As the Commanding Officer, I have the ultimate authority and responsibility for the unit here in Chicago. We are overall responsible for the safety and security of the Maritime Transportation System. The area that I cover is the southern tip of Lake Michigan, which includes the Illinois Waterway and its tributaries, and all of this area makes up what we call the Chicago Area Waterway System. To try to put that in layman's terms, it's truly having the opportunity to ensure the safety as well as the security of people on the waterway and the waterway itself. We also do environmental protection, and we are responsible for regulating any type of commercial vessels on the water and ensuring their safety as well as all the ports that line the Lake Michigan area as well as the Illinois Waterway. We oversee the safety and security of those ports and facilities.

PP: How many people do you have in that unit that are under your command?

ZM: My unit is actually fairly small, despite the area that we're responsible over. I have a total of 53 active duty and reserve members that work under my office.

PP: What initially made you want to enlist in the Coast Guard? Was this something that you've always known you wanted to pursue?

ZM: It actually came as a surprise to me as well as my family and all of those that knew me. I always had a passion for service, but not particularly military service. I was an undergraduate at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, and my major was biology/pre-med. I always had a passion to serve, but specifically in the medical field. And so for as long as I knew and everyone else knew, that was one of the things I was going to do. In college, during my junior year preparing for the MCAT, I just had this revelation about not going to medical school and not taking the next step for another four years, and then several years after that in residency. And I knew I wanted to do something where I could be on my own and give back immediately, and just have a job and a career for myself immediately after college. I had heard about the Coast Guard through one of my classmates in school, and the recruiter came and talked to me about it. And specifically they talked to me about the environmental management and marine safety piece that I could relate to from my background. Like I said, my major was biology, but I was also taking botany classes and environmental management classes as electives, so it translated in a way where I was like, oh, this is something where I could use my degree and also serve. It was a scholarship program that the Coast Guard still has to this day for college students attending minority-serving institutions. That scholarship program paid for my tuition as well as provided a stipend that was approximately at that point in time, a little over 20 years ago, I was probably making about \$32,000 a year, as well as my books and fees. So I joined the Coast Guard the summer before my senior year, went to boot camp, finished up my senior year, graduated, and then attended Officer Candidate School. I did have the unique opportunity to actually go into the field that the recruiter had spoken to me about, and that I had an interest in. And so I started in New Orleans and that has been my operational career ever since.

PP: What are some of the challenges you've faced as an African-American woman in the US Coast Guard, and how have you addressed those challenges?

Interviews

ZM: In the Coast Guard—the military in general—there’s a low number of minorities in the service, and specifically in the Coast Guard. When you think about what we do, it’s not particularly a field that draws a lot of minorities. So you have that, and then put on top of it being a female, there are challenges in that as well. One of my biggest challenges unfortunately is actually the field that I currently work in. In the Maritime Transportation System you just do not have a high number of minorities or women, so the challenges have been great. But I also think about one of my idols who was the first African-American woman to join the Coast Guard, Dr. Olivia Hooker. She was the first African-American woman to join the Coast Guard during World War II, and the challenges that she had were just nothing that what I deal with on a day-to-day basis can compare with. I often think of her whenever I have any of those types of challenges, because not only was she able to successfully join the Coast Guard, but she also was a survivor of the Tulsa race riot, and she went on to further her education as far as becoming a professor and a Doctor of Philosophy. As far as my challenges as an African-American woman in the Coast Guard, it’s something that I deal with by being proficient in what I do. The majority of the time you cannot challenge someone when they are knowledgeable and proficient and being the best in their career. That’s what I really try to focus my efforts on, not particularly being the minority or the female, but just being the best in my career field, and that’s something that people can’t challenge at the end of the day. But I really take a lot of time in giving back in educating the community on what it is that I do, and try to garner more attention to the Coast Guard as a path and as a career field to increase the number of minorities in the Coast Guard. Even in the city of Chicago, where I have the opportunity to often go to high schools and give back in the community, I can’t overstate how excited people are to see me in uniform. And it’s kind of a weird feeling because I just get stares, and that in itself is powerful when you are in the community that does not often see leaders that look like them in the service. Even in the Coast Guard, I am one of the highest-ranking African-American females because we only have one African-American captain, which is 06, and I’m an 05. That in itself is a testament that there’s still a lot of ground we need to cover when it comes to not only the interest but the promotion of African-Americans, and specifically females, not only in the Coast Guard, but in the military.

PP: Our next question is focused on your academic career. You received your MPA from GW in 2010, but that was actually your second masters degree. You first received a Master of Quality Systems Management from the National Graduate School. What made you decide to then go back for your MPA, and what made you choose GW in particular?

ZM: In 2003 I decided to go and get my masters in quality systems management, and that really laid the foundation that helped me to not only attack problems but look at solutions. That kind of started my passion for education. I always had it, but 2003 was the first time that I had the opportunity to actually take courses because I had been in operational jobs. I was assigned to DC and I started working on my degree in quality systems management. I was doing that at the same time I was working, and one of my mentors, who is actually a graduate from GW as well, was Admiral Thad Allen. I was working for him, and my first tour in DC really opened my eyes to the different side of service as far as seeing how the government works. And so with the assistance of my mentor telling me about GW and having an opportunity to visit, I knew at the end of the day that was where I wanted to go. I did have the opportunity to

possibly go to Harvard for the public administration program, but it was just something about GW after visiting. I really just had an affinity towards it. When I think about it, it was really my interaction with the professors, and how hands-on they were. From the moment I had the opportunity to visit, they just kept in contact. It felt like my undergraduate college where it was small and you had the opportunity to really develop relationships with the professors. So from there, I had the opportunity to apply to the university through the Coast Guard that allowed me to go full-time. That was what was unique about my experience at GW and getting the second masters. The first one I did while working full-time and going to school part-time. And it was literally one of the best decisions that I've made when it comes to education, and the relationships that I've built during my time there at GW have been lasting ever since, not only with my colleagues, but also with the professors.

PP: I think you just named a bunch of reasons why we also love GW and chose GW as well. And any time you talk about alumni of the Trachtenberg School, Admiral Allen's name always comes up. He's been such a staunch advocate for Trachtenberg.

ZM: And in turn I've become that advocate. So whenever we have people who are interested in the MPA program, I always point them towards GW. And there are several people that I now mentor that have done the program and have enjoyed it just as much as I have.

PP: That's awesome. We also want to ask about your PhD in Business Administration from the National Graduate School.

ZM: That was really me being a glutton for punishment. I started the doctorate program while attending GW. I know, crazy. It was just a very hard time, but I got through it. When I finished my first year at GW, I started the doctorate program the second year. It built on my first masters in quality systems management. It's a doctorate of business administration, but the focus was in quality systems management. It just paralleled what I was already doing, and it actually built on not only of course the masters that I got, but also my MPA. Because a lot of people if they're interested in the MPA, they also think of the MBA, and just with my background already in quality systems management, I decided to go ahead and do my doctorate on that. It kind of bridged that small gap between public administration and business administration and allowed me to look at not only the things I was interested in from a government and policy perspective, but how to improve those things using the techniques of quality systems management. Both of them proved to be extremely beneficial in not only my day-to-day work, but in my time immediately after I graduated GW on the Hill.

PP: That pretty much captures the next question we were going to ask as far as the benefits of doing both public and business administration, and if there's any key differences or even overlap that you see between the two.

ZM: Definitely a lot of overlap when it comes to organizational management and a lot of the things that I do on a day-to-day basis. It was extremely important and beneficial to me to have the opportunity to serve as a Congressional Fellow after attending GW. It was such a dynamic time right in the middle of President Obama's election. I'd never been so immersed in politics and it was just a different part of the government that I hadn't really paid attention to. To go have that experience at GW and then turn around and serve on the Hill...it was one of those times in my life when I look back and I can't believe what I actually did. I was working of the majority one year as a fellow, and then the House flipped, and we were in

Interviews

the minority, and then I actually had to change jobs too. I was working for Transportation and Infrastructure and then I moved over to Oversight and Government Reform, because a lot of people lost their jobs during that particular time. It was a rough time, because as a fellow, you become one of them. I was a staffer. And just to see the effect of what that did to the people that I worked with every day was hard. Even the chairman at that particular time ended up losing his race, and so it was again a very eye-opening experience. I probably wouldn't have had that opportunity if I hadn't been in the Coast Guard and hadn't gotten my MPA to see, as we say, how the sausage is made.

PP: You slightly hit on this already as well, but where and how have you been able to apply the knowledge, skills, and experiences from your time at GW to your professional life? What specific aspects of the MPA program have you found most valuable?

ZM: It was most beneficial for me to have had the opportunity to go and work on the Hill after graduating from GW. But my MPA has also helped me work at the highest level of organization in the government, which is something that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to do if I didn't go to GW. There are very few jobs in the military where you can be chosen to work at the highest level of the government. So having the opportunity to be a fellow, and then also turning around and having the opportunity to be executive assistant to our number one and number two head of the organization [in the Coast Guard], the only reason I've had the opportunity to do that is based on some of the experiences that GW afforded me. Not everyone in the Coast Guard gets to be a fellow. Not everyone in the Coast Guard gets to be an executive assistant. It's really reserved for people who have proven themselves in the organization, not only operationally, but knowing and understanding the bigger picture of how government works. And GW helped lay that foundation.

PP: Connections and opportunities to work in government is a benefit of going to GW you often hear.

ZM: Yeah. And it's just very unique to be in the heart of DC and learning public administration. There's nothing that compares to that. It's very unique, and you have some of the top professors in public administration, and you're seeing a lot of things through their eyes and their experiences. It's more like a hands-on experience compared to what you would get at another university.

PP: You've said before that "True leadership is servanthood." Can you elaborate a bit on what you mean by that and how you try to embody that notion throughout your career?

ZM: I briefly mentioned that I've always had a passion for service, so when you look at it from the aspect of me being young, of being a Girl Scout throughout my whole childhood, a candy stripper at the hospital, and just an avid proponent of community service, that was my foundation. That's what was instilled in me at a young age, to give back and to put people before yourself. In my time in the Coast Guard in deciding to serve, it has always been: put service before self. So to be a true leader, you have to be able to put people before yourself. Even when you look at the statistics of the active-duty military service, you have less than a half a percent of America serving in the military, and to do that in itself is to be a leader. To decide to serve in the military, you're deciding to be a leader among the few. I've had unique opportunities to truly embody that beyond what I do every day, like my recent deployments during the hurricanes. I had the opportunity to go to Port Arthur, Texas, right

after Harvey and help them with their recovery and reconstitution of operations in the port there. It was just amazing to see how everybody came together to help those communities in the midst of the floods, and how the communities had so much respect for us and what it was that we were doing for them, trying to give them a new normal. And more recently, I deployed to Puerto Rico, and I spent almost a month there just trying to get the island reconstituted. And that was one of the biggest pieces of true leadership and service that I've actually had in my career, just to be there and see the devastation, and see the communities, and actually go out and serve those communities. So if I wasn't working operations to get vessels back into the port, I was helping deliver goods to communities in rural areas that still don't have power and still don't have running water. And just to see their faces where you're giving them something as simple as a pallet of water, that is true servanthood, and that is a testament to leadership.

PP: Do you think there's any difference in the way that one can manifest leadership as servanthood in a military context, compared to the context of working on the Hill, or working in other places in the public or the private sector?

ZM: You know, there is a difference, but at the end of the day, when it comes to servant leadership, everyone has their part. And I look at deciding to do public service, or be a civil servant, as commendable in itself. So if you decide to be a staffer, or go into politics, or go into a nonprofit, or go into the military, you're still putting others before yourself and working for the good of the people. Of course in the military people are putting their lives on the line, but it's still a reflection of being a servant. No different than people who fight every day to make sure, be it equal pay, be in things like that, on the Hill. They are looking beyond themselves to try to make the world a better place. So there's different types. I feel like everybody has their part, but at the end of the day they are putting people before themselves and doing it for the good of the people.

PP: If weren't serving in the Coast Guard, what kind of career would you want to pursue instead? Do you think you would have still gone into the medical field, or was there another career that you were interested in?

ZM: I literally put all my eggs in one basket when I decided to go into the medical field. So when the Coast Guard opportunity came around, it was like oh okay, am I going to do something different? If I didn't go into the Coast Guard, I think I still would have pursued the medical field. It would have definitely been something in service, and I'm almost 100% certain I would have continued on my path for my medical degree.

PP: Our last question is, what advice would you give to current students at Trachtenberg who are thinking about the next step in their career? Are there any things you wish you would have done or that you would have known while you were working on your degree at Trachtenberg?

ZM: Because I was in the Coast Guard, I was in the very unique position where I had a career, and some of my colleagues were at the point of deciding what was next for them. And I think looking back there was an opportunity to work together more. I think I could have given back more to them. Not specifically in the Coast Guard, but just as an older person in school, and helped them realize some of the things that they wanted to be, and give them more experience based on what I had already gone through. I think at that time I

Interviews

was already in the military a little over ten years, so I think there was just an opportunity to collaborate more to help them. I think there was an opportunity for more comradery at the end of the day, and to leverage what each individual kind of brought to the table could have been beneficial for everyone in the long run. I don't know if that makes sense?

PP: Yes, definitely.

ZM: I guess my advice for students today is to take advantage of those opportunities and the diversity of the class to help with whatever it is that you want to do next. Not only take advantage of the opportunities that are right in front of you as far as your colleagues, but see what it is also outside of your day-to-day class environment. You can make your experience at GW even better. You're in the heart of DC and there's so much going on, so much you could be a part of outside of your day-to-day work, and I would definitely encourage them to embrace those things.