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Program helps veterans turn dreams into businesses

by Judy Gross



The 2010 Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities class at Florida State University.

Last year, more than 100,000 American troops came home from overseas wars. Thousands more will arrive from Iraq as that war ends this year. From many, what may start out as a rousing "Welcome home" by USO volunteers at major airports, or family and friends waiting with smiles and hugs at local airports, can quickly deteriorate for the veteran with no place to live and no work to do.

Since 2009, the unemployment rate for U.S. veterans has doubled. The unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans now stands 20 percent, more than twice the rate for the national civilian population.

A number of factors contribute to this high rate.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans points out that military job skills and training are not always transferable to the civilian work force.

A 2008 RAND Corporation study found that one in five Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans have endured physical (traumatic brain injuries) or psychological (post-traumatic stress disorder or depression) wounds that impair their cognitive abilities. With many jobs today requiring 21st-century skills, these veterans have major obstacles to finding employment.

As National Guard Reserve troops now outnumber active-duty forces, long absences from their jobs may mean employers who might have held their jobs open can no longer do so. Some veterans come home to find their jobs have disappeared as companies have closed in the Great Recession.

Recognizing the first of these problems, the U.S. Navy is instituting programs to certify soon-to-be discharged sailors, enabling them to apply to civilian jobs the skills they learned in the military in roles such as medics, machinists or mess cooks. Often, licensing requirements in states hinder post-military job applicants from landing jobs they are qualified to do.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., has sponsored a bill requiring all services to do what the Navy is doing. The bill would cut through the red tape for veterans to enter the federal job force.

The Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University in New York originated the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities in 2007, and the program has spread to six other universities around the country. Nicknamed "From Boots to Business Suits," the program has helped 350 veterans to realize their dreams of being business owners by training them in management skills and entrepreneurship. The boot camp is supported by donations and costs the disabled vets nothing.

About 70 percent of boot camp graduates have opened their own businesses, and at least four of those graduates are now running businesses with revenues of more than a million dollars annually, according to the program's website.

Raymond Toenniessen, who directs Syracuse University's veteran outreach program, describes the three phases of the boot camp: Veterans who are accepted into the program begin with a 35-day online and interactive course. Then they travel to the nearest participating university for a nine-day intensive course with business professionals and faculty. As they begin to put their business plans into action, the veterans receive continuing technical assistance from faculty and boot camp partners.

Toenniessen says veterans acquire the most basic skills to become successful entrepreneurs through their military training.

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"They succeed because in the military they develop risk-taking and discipline, and it transfers into running a business. They have a passion for what they do," he said.

"Some veterans are in boot camp with just the germ of an idea, others have already begun their businesses," Toenniessen said. "We help them learn how to grow and sustain it."

Businesses range from a portrait studio to private investigators to a mobile oil-changing service.

Honey Rodgers of Keller, Texas, was medically retired in 2005 after more than eight years of active duty. While searching the Internet for educational benefits, she learned about the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities. She attended the program at Texas A&M University. She said the boot camp completely changed her life.

"I went to [the boot camp] with a completely different business model, a construction industry company," she said. "While at [the program] ... I realized I was missing a vital piece for a successful business: passion. I was involved in a trade I both did not understand nor was very interested in wanting to

understand."

When Rodgers reflected on what she actually had a passion for, she realized what really excited her was photography.

"I had spent many of my past years working for other photographers as an underpaid assistant, never understanding my own abilities," she said.

Soon Honeybee Portraits was launched with the advice and support of the resources she found at the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp.

As her way of paying her good fortune forward, Rodgers volunteers for Operation: Love ReUnited, capturing in photographs the moments of military members deploying or returning home to their families.



Daniel Hash of Kaysville, Utah, has had a fascination with birds since he caught a pigeon by hand when he was 5 years old. After completing mission work in Portugal, Hash served six years in the Air Force in the Middle East.

While deployed, he earned three college degrees, and while in Iraq, worked on his plan for a business that would incorporate his love of birds.

After being discharged, the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp helped him turn his dream into reality. He founded United Doves in 2008.

United Doves rents out doves for release during events like funerals, weddings and public celebrations. United Doves has kicked off the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure in Little Rock, Ark., since 2008 to raise funds for breast cancer research. Hash trains the birds to return home after their release from as far as 500 miles away, though usually he releases them within 60 miles of their home base.

Hash is franchising the business and now has dove-rental businesses in seven states and Washington, D.C. He said he is determined to have United Doves operating nationwide by 2015, and he is working on a master's degree in international business and entrepreneurship.



Hash considers United Doves much more than a just a business, referring to a photograph of himself standing in front of a mural of doves on a wall at Baghdad International Airport. It is a potent symbol of the peace doves can grant humans.

"Even though the war did give me some disabilities, I am living proof that if you want to be successful despite all the trials that may come in life, there is hope," Hash said.

"It was the birds of peace that got me through the difficult times in Iraq, despite all the chaos happening around the environment we served," he said.

Randy Blass, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, runs the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp at Florida State University in Tallahassee. He has raised \$500,000 since 2007 to run the program. He said one measure of the program's effectiveness is that *Inc.* magazine has featured two boot camp graduates.

He emphasizes that the boot camp is not an easy way out for veterans. The program is intense and requires skill and persistence to steer an idea to fruition.

"The vets learn that it may take five to seven years to be able to call their business a success," he said.

For this reason, he said, the program isn't for all vets. Those with "less visible" wounds, like traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress, may find the rigors of the program too much.

A new addition to the core boot camp model is a program for the families of wounded veterans. The Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans' Families teaches small-business skills for at-home caretakers. The program, supported through a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs, provides respite care for military veterans with service-related injuries while teaching caregivers, often young spouses, how to run home-based businesses.

Blass said he finds personal satisfaction from his involvement with the boot camp program.

"Hearing a wife say to me at the end of the program, 'You've given me my husband back,' with so much love and gratitude, amazes me," he said.

[Judy Gross writes for *NCR* from Tallahassee.]

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