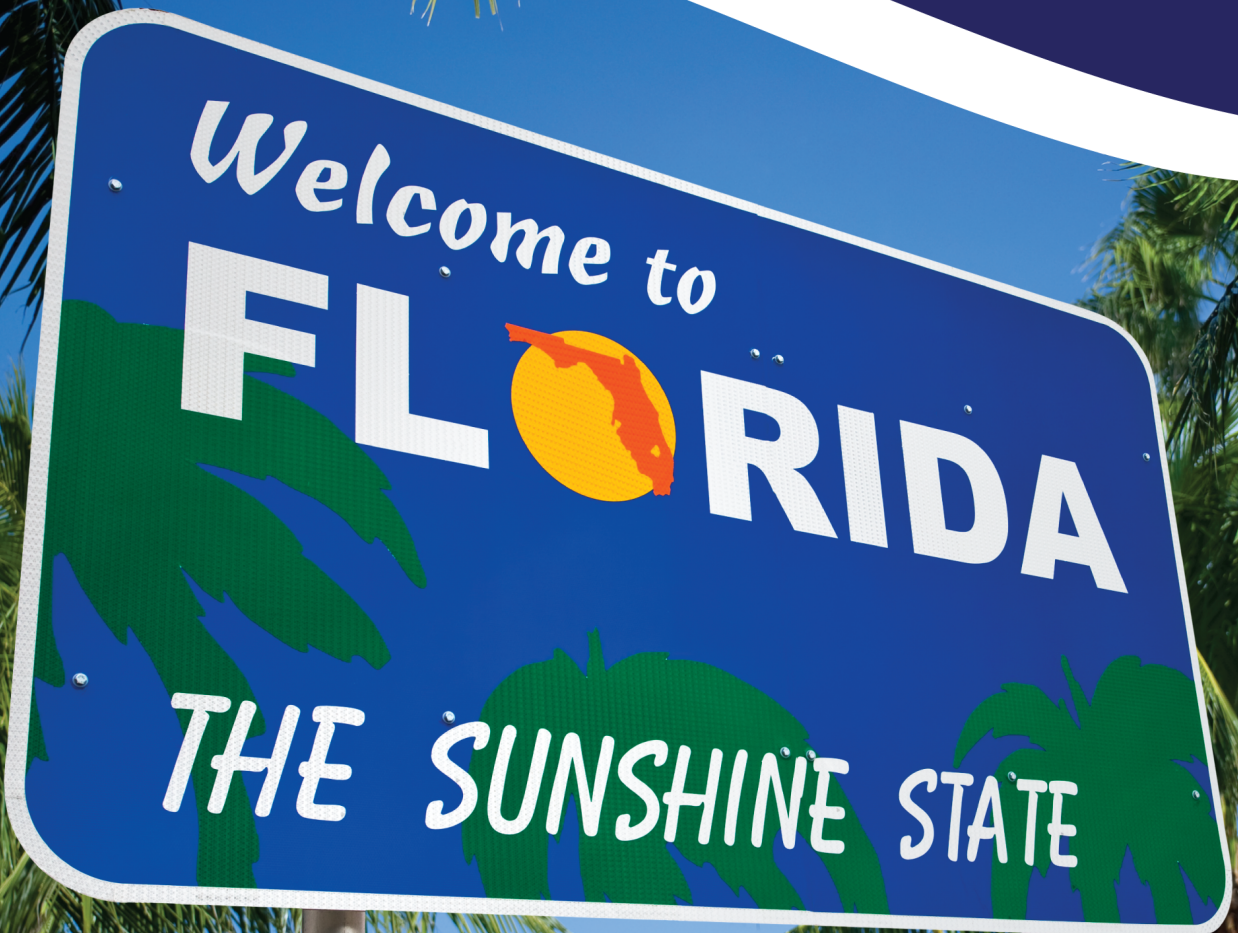




# VETERANS FLORIDA

Your Pursuit • Our Power



## Pursuit Meets Power

*Stories of Veteran Success in Florida*





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Dear Veterans, Servicemembers, and Military Spouses;

Florida means different things to everyone. Some think of our beautiful white sand beaches, while others remember visiting theme parks, enjoying our award-winning state parks, or watching historic space launches. Here at Veterans Florida, the Sunshine State means opportunity.

And Florida's always been on the leading edge of creating opportunities for transitioning veterans and servicemembers. When the state legislature established Veterans Florida in 2014, we were among the first states to create an organization focused entirely on attracting veterans and helping them find careers and start businesses.

Our entrepreneurship program is now the state's largest creator of Veteran-owned businesses, and Florida was the first to create a statewide SkillBridge initiative which is now a model for others.

Our mission can be summed up in our theme – Your Pursuit. Our Power. – because we recognize military veterans are incredibly focused and will succeed in achieving their personal and professional goals when they take advantage of our tools and resources.

Enjoy this collection of stories that encapsulate that theme, and welcome to Florida!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Joe Marino". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

**Joe Marino**

**Veterans Florida Executive Director**







# VETERANS FLORIDA

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAM

*The State's Largest Creator of Veteran-Owned Businesses*

LEARN MORE



## Chef Richard Rosado Cooks Up Success With 1PL8

Nov. 2021

U.S. Marine Corps veteran Richard Rosado combined his love for cooking with a determined mindset instilled by the military to found 1PL8 — and adding Florida's resources and business-friendly environment to the mix proved to be a recipe for success.

Born and raised in New York, Rosado credits his mother and grandmother for putting him on the path to becoming an award-winning chef and culinary

instructor.

"Growing up in a Hispanic family, food is a huge part of our lives," he said. "Every family party always ended up in the kitchen, and my mom and grandmother spent hours and hours cooking to not just feed everyone, but making sure everyone went home completely stuffed. I fell in love with that caring, kind hospitable character that was demonstrated by them."

Rosado said he'd always wanted to join the Marines



and enlisted after graduating high school. Although he only spent one week of his service in the kitchen, Rosado said he's grateful the military instilled two vital traits that gave him an edge as a professional chef: discipline and self-motivation.

"You'd think those skill sets will never be good for when you get out, but you couldn't be more wrong; those are the core foundations for the task of being an entrepreneur," he said.

Rosado added: "Starting a business is going to be one of the hardest things that you've ever done. It drains you physically, emotionally, and mentally, but I think what gives you the ability to withstand those pressures is your military background; it's the persistence, dedication, and the mindset to continue moving forward that are extremely valuable assets."

After transitioning out of the military, Rosado worked at a couple of restaurants in New York and attended the Culinary Institute of America, giving him the opportunity to learn from "the greatest culinary minds on the planet all under one roof."

When Rosado's parents moved to Florida more than a decade ago, he took a trip down to visit them and immediately fell in love with what the Sunshine State has to offer.

"When I came to visit them and see what [Florida] was like, I just said 'forget it, I'll just stay here,'" he recalled. "It's really nice and everything is clean, so it's a lot different than New York."

Rosado continued: "As a father of three, family is everything to me, and just like every entrepreneur and veteran out there, I know family is crucial to them as well. I wouldn't think of any other place to raise my family than here in Florida. I've been out here ever since and wouldn't move back."

During Rosado's more than 20 years of culinary experience, he's been a personal chef to NBA All-Star

Grant Hill, served former First Lady Michelle Obama, and cooked for numerous entertainers, business moguls, and professional athletes. In addition to writing the book "Food is Our Greatest Medicine," Rosado was an award-winning chef instructor at Le Cordon Bleu and has held thousands of cooking demonstrations and classes for major corporations, hospitals, and organizations.

Seeing skyrocketing health insurance costs, increasing dependence on prescription drugs, and the country becoming unhealthier by the day, Rosado set out to reverse this vicious cycle and in 2017 founded 1PL8 — a health and wellness business based out of Orlando whose mission is to educate and empower consumers to manage and reduce chronic illness by using food as medicine.

1PL8 uses a two-prong approach: The 1PL8 Culinary Preventative Care (CPC) is an 8-week disease management program designed to help employers reduce health care costs while improving employee quality of life by preventing high-risk employees from becoming ill and helping chronically ill employees stabilize their conditions.

On the other side is 1PL8 Kitchen TV — a 30-minute cooking show hosted by Rosado airing nationally on NRBTv and locally in Central Florida on Spectrum and Comcast. Rosado uses a "fun and educational" teaching style to simplify cooking techniques while ensuring each episode focuses on a single "delicious and nutritious" meal that feeds a family of four for \$20 or less.

Seeking out Florida's tools and resources and building 1PL8's business model, Rosado enrolled in the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program and attended a training cohort for startups with the Veterans Entrepreneurship Initiative (VEI).

"1PL8's mission to help businesses lower insurance



*"Having the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program resources like in-person workshops, co-working spaces, mentorship programs, and in-depth groups allows veterans to learn how to mitigate the entrepreneurship pitfalls and increase business success while building lasting relationships."*

costs, retain labor, and improve productivity due to a healthier labor force is a herculean task,” he said. “Having the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program resources like in-person workshops, co-working spaces, mentorship programs, and in-depth groups allows veterans to learn how to mitigate the entrepreneurship pitfalls and increase business success while building lasting relationships.”

Rosado added: “Take that first step and let the VEI help you. I promise it’ll be worth it. One of the most important tools they give you is the business model canvas because it asks you questions that you really have to sit back and think about. Also, the opportunities and resources that VEI has to help you build relationships with other entrepreneurs that are extremely successful and can actually help you out to miss a lot of the pitfalls.”

“It has been inspiring to watch Chef Rich take his business from idea, to launch, to now scaling his

campaigns with the rest going towards website and technology improvements.

Rosado praised how welcoming Florida is to veteran entrepreneurs and said it shows the state understands the importance of small businesses and the need to foster that through startup and growth development.

“Florida is a great place to start a business,” Rosado said. “The state of Florida acknowledges the commitment made by veterans and honors that with support to start, grow and expand your business. The financial struggles you go through when starting a business are really taxing and demanding, but the amount of resources they make available for free to an entrepreneur at any level is outstanding and really blew me away.”

As for the future 1PL8, Rosado plans to expand the company and make a positive impact on the health of businesses, families, and communities across the



*“Florida is a great place to start a business. The state of Florida acknowledges the commitment made by veterans and honors that with support to start, grow and expand your business.”*

company,” said Air Force veteran and VEI co-founder Ricardo Garcia. “The state of Florida is a great place for veteran entrepreneurs to launch and grow their business thanks to incredible organizations like Veterans Florida and its network partners throughout the State of Florida.”

Rosado faced off against other veteran entrepreneurs in the Battle of the Pitches at the 2021 Veterans Florida Virtual Expo. With the help of VEI, who nominated him and assisted with each step of pitch preparation, 1PL8 took home 3rd place at the competition.

“As a natural competitor, I love challenging myself so when I found out about the pitch competition, I was all-in,” Rosado said. “It gave me the opportunity to learn from others and to take my business model and get opinions and advice from other business leaders.”

Rosado used about 40% of the winnings from the pitch competition on marketing through social media

country.

“Our long-term goal would be to scale the company nationally to not only businesses but also municipalities, colleges, and universities and see at least a minimum of 50% reduction in chronic illness across the country,” Rosado said. “I think that’s a huge goal, but I think I know it can be obtained once we start really digging into this and then consumers and businesses start to see that it does work.”

For any veterans considering entrepreneurship, Rosado strongly recommends reaching out to Veterans Florida and our partners and ultimately, not letting fear stop you from getting started.

“The road is tough, but so are you and you don’t have to walk it alone; you have other men and women just like you that will walk with you,” Rosado said. “Don’t let fear stop you from being who you want to be. You have everything you need to be successful already inside you.” ●





# OMAR FUENTES' ACCELEQ BRINGS TECH-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE HEALTHCARE

Nov. 2021

U.S. Marine Corps veteran Omar Fuentes always knew he wanted to go into business. Determined to solve some of the healthcare industry's biggest problems, he started his business, acceLEQ, in Florida — praising the state for giving him the resources and freedom to turn his idea into reality.

Originally from New York, Fuentes' family moved to Tampa, where he enlisted in the Marines. After graduating top of his class, he joined the Marine Corps Security Force Regiment in Virginia tasked with supporting urban warfare and security operations, eventually transferring to the training department to train new recruits following 9/11.

"It was an experience that laid the foundation of my abilities; to be tenacious, strategic, and knowing how to execute and deal with obstacles as they come," Fuentes said of his military service. "I would not trade that for the world."

Fuentes transitioned out of the military and knew his future would "be in business." A friend suggested going into finance and after spending time in investment consulting, he found a path into the healthcare industry; where he would leverage his experience in the Marines to help him climb the corporate ladder and accumulate close to 14 years of experience at some of the largest healthcare organizations.

The "catalyst" for founding acceLEQ came following the passing of his father and brother and his wife's cancer diagnosis — all of which Fuentes said could've either been prevented or alleviated if there wasn't a lack of access to affordable care or numerous inefficiencies within the system.

"After seeing the issues that my family and I had encountered firsthand, I really wanted to fix the healthcare system," Fuentes said.

Working nights and weekends at first, Fuentes decided to start working full-time on his idea and committed to bootstrapping his startup with savings and back pay from the VA.

By learning to do most things himself — web development, marketing, video editing, and more — Fuentes managed to keep costs low and used only a small portion of his own capital to build the company's infrastructure, allowing him to use the rest to support his family of five and take care of his mother.

"I just had to be as resourceful as possible and bet on myself," he said. "The decision to go all-in on myself and the knowledge I have really helped lay the foundation for where I'm at today."

Though he started out using his background to offer consulting services, COVID-19 accelerated his move towards a virtual platform where he found that acquiring funding for the development of acceLEQ's

minimum viable product — the first iteration that can go to market and generate feedback — was the biggest challenge he faced.

He sought the advice of fellow veteran entrepreneur Erik Maltais, who told him to get a co-founder with the technical background to build the software since “no one is going to cut you a check for your idea; you have to build something to bring to them.”

Resistant to the idea of offering equity shares of his startup, Fuentes recalled his perspective changed when Maltais said to him: “Sometimes obstacles are placed before you specifically so that you can change directions.”

That advice, he said, “hit me like a ton of bricks,” causing him to immediately reach out to personal contacts. Within weeks, Fuentes brought on two co-founders to help him build the platform, citing it as the spark he needed to realize his vision and turn his idea into something tangible.

resources.

Fuentes attended a CEO Mindset growth training cohort by JULO Strategy through the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program and entered acceEQ into the Battle of the Pitches at the 2021 Veterans Florida Virtual Expo and competed against other veteran entrepreneurs, taking home 2nd place.

Fuentes used the pitch competition winnings to help fund a trip to Chicago to meet with venture capitalists as part of the PenFed Foundation Veteran Entrepreneur Investment Program, gaining interest from investors with one planning to invest between five and six figures in acceEQ.

“Being able to obtain this investment will catapult us to the next level and allow us to immediately make a positive impact within healthcare,” Fuentes said following the meeting with investors. His long-term plans for acceEQ include improving the company’s quality of service, continuing to innovate within the

*“Reaching out to Veterans Florida is a great start because they are connected everywhere. Having a good conversation with them about what resources are out there is going to be extremely imperative for you to be able to take the next step.”*



Fuentes’ acceEQ is an end-to-end virtual SaaS platform designed to integrate into existing medical provider data systems to increase efficiency, improve quality of care, and reduce costs for medical professionals, patients, and employers.

By eliminating time-wasting tasks — such as group telehealth appointments, transcribing the doctor-patient interactions, automating reimbursement claims, and more — Fuentes said his platform allows doctors to spend more time with their patients and hopes to prevent the bureaucratic burnout that’s prevalent within the medical community.

Fuentes continued to expand his professional network and through a contact at the Pasco County Economic Development Center, he met retired U.S. Marine Corps Major Gen. James S. “Hammer” Hartsell, Executive Director of the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs (FDVA), who recommended reaching out to Veterans Florida for entrepreneurship

healthcare industry, and providing veterans with career opportunities at his company.

Fuentes strongly encourages veterans to become entrepreneurs, believing those who’ve served in the military possess intangible and transferable skills that aren’t found anywhere else.

“As veterans and to those serving in the military right now, the first thing we have to recognize is there’s something innate within us,” he said. “We made a choice most people would not or could not make: To serve a purpose much greater than ourselves.”

By honing the skills taught by the military, such as being resourceful and adapting to complete an objective, Fuentes said veterans can apply their experience to overcome any obstacle and gain an edge on the competition in the business world.

“In the military, they break you down so they can build you right back up,” Fuentes said. “That goes a long way because once you go into entrepreneurship,



it's going to break you down and you won't have the structure or support system that the military provides; but you'll be able to lean on that experience and continue to press forward."

For veterans considering entrepreneurship or who are looking to grow their existing veteran-owned business, Fuentes recommends connecting with Veterans Florida and taking advantage of our numerous resources and networking opportunities.

"Reaching out to Veterans Florida is a great start because they are connected everywhere," Fuentes said. "Having a good conversation with them about what resources are out there is going to be extremely imperative for you to be able to take the next step."

While he's had opportunities to live in other states, Fuentes said he wouldn't consider living anywhere else since Florida offers veterans unparalleled resources and benefits for starting and growing a business and

goes out of its way to facilitate that development.

"I was always drawn back to Florida," Fuentes said, adding that "the resources, low taxes, and benefits of starting a business in Florida are pretty significant; plus you have access to Veterans Florida and other organizations who are huge on trying to attract, retain, and grow talent right here."

In addition to the weather, amenities, and perks the state offers, Fuentes said perhaps the biggest advantage Florida has over other states for veterans like himself is the freedom to enjoy life, take care of his family, and pursue his passion.

"The state is open, and it really has shown an incredible amount of vibrancy," Fuentes said. "As veterans, we're constantly looking at freedom and to have the freedoms that we have in Florida is just tremendous to me." ●

## SETH HICKERSON'S MY STEADY MIND BRINGS MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING TO THE MAINSTREAM

*Dec. 2021*

U.S. Navy and Air Force veteran Seth Hickerson's worked with military special operations, athletes, doctors, and law enforcement and accumulated years of experience developing strategic ways to recognize stress and improve their performance — and after starting his business and moving to Florida, he took advantage of state's veteran resources to take his company, My Steady Mind, to the next level.

Even though he was a highly-touted, three-sport high school athlete in Southern Indiana, he decided to join the military and Hickerson enlisted with the Navy; first stationed in Japan before joining the Seabees in Spain, Guam, and Southern California.

Hickerson said joining the Navy laid the foundation for his future success in the mental health field; from the military teaching him how to "overcome and embrace the suck" of day-to-day life to his experience stationed in Tokyo opening his eyes to how we can better train ourselves mentally by practicing mindfulness and meditation.

"The experience that really made me start looking more into mental health came when I left Tokyo for a couple of weeks, and the first thing I noticed when I came home was how irritated and agitated everybody was," Hickerson said, recognizing the mental wellness disparity between the heavily populated Tokyo and his small hometown of Bedford. "There's 14 million in Tokyo, but it's very peaceful, serene, and orderly. There's 30,000 people in my hometown and everybody



feels wound up.”

Upon returning to Tokyo, Hickerson said he began “learning more about the temples, meditation, and practices they use for mindfulness and emotional intelligence and started trying out all the different things that they do to help them manage their mental health.”

After transitioning out of the Navy, Hickerson pursued a bachelor’s in Health and Physical Education before joining the Air Force Reserve in graduate school, where he went on to earn a master’s in Sport Psychology and a doctorate in Educational Leadership.

While working with athletes as the director of student fitness and health at the University of Richmond, Hickerson recalled first considering entrepreneurship when his friend, Army veteran and entrepreneur Fred Bryant, encouraged him to go into business. Initially hesitant and not knowing where to begin, Bryant returned with a business plan and laid out the steps he needed to take to get it off the ground.

“He helped coach me up, gave me that nudge, and showed me how I could turn what I do into a business,” Hickerson said.

Following a move to Manhattan then Oklahoma City and reconnecting with Bryant, who’d returned home from his deployment, Hickerson used money from a house sale to bootstrap his first startup, Boost Mental Toughness & Leadership.

“I had all these experiences and credentials and a background in high-level mental skills training, and I knew that it was a skill set that more people needed,” Hickerson said. “I set out to start a business to bring that to the masses.”

Even though Boost proved successful, Hickerson saw that it could be even better; which became evident at the start of the pandemic and after relocating to Melbourne, Florida. Predicting that there’d be a

growing need for mental health training, Hickerson decided to “rebuild and reload” and relaunched the company as My Steady Mind to bring his skill set to more people.

“When the pandemic hit we knew mental health was going to go from bad to worse in our country,” he said. “Boost was the first company; it was good, but not great. We wanted to make sure we had a great product and service that would meet the needs of our primary markets: healthcare and law enforcement.”

Hickerson continued: “We updated and rebuilt everything: The course, the learning management system, and the delivery — everything went from JV to Olympic-level quality. We knew people’s minds were going to be very unsteady, so My Steady Mind was born to help people deal with the stress and exhaustion they are living with.”

My Steady Mind is a 9-module online course with live expert coaching designed to reduce stress and improve performance through mindfulness and mental resilience, enabling program participants to perform better in even the most chaotic of environments.

Along with raising awareness about the need for mental health and putting an end to decades-long stigmas surrounding the practice, Hickerson said My Steady Mind’s mission is to bring the training to people who’ve never had access to legitimate, comprehensive mental health training.

“20% of our population has a mental illness or a diagnosable mental illness and those people need treatment. The other 80% needs mental health training, which is what I do,” Hickerson said, citing statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health’s annual report. “Mental health is stigmatic because people don’t know what it is in our society; they hear the word ‘mental health’ and they think ‘mental illness’ and they’re not the same. That’s the big disconnect,

### ***Seth Hickerson and the My Steady Mind team***





and we as a society don't do anything or talk about mental health training. We try to shove everyone into the treatment model — that's why it's stigmatic."

Hickerson continued: "What we do is performance-based mental health training to help improve your performance whether you're Navy SEAL, an athlete, a CEO, or a stay-at-home mom. That's what most people need and want; they've just never had access to it before."

While working with Groundswell Startups, he connected with COO Jarin Eisenberg, who got him a coworking space through its partnership with the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program and encouraged him to enter My Steady Mind into the Battle of the Pitches at the 2021 Veterans Florida Virtual Expo.

"I'm always interested in doing anything with the veteran community; I love to support it and be around it," Hickerson said. "When I saw it was a veteran event, I thought 'Alright: Let's give it a shot.'"

Hickerson practiced his pitch and with the help of Brian Brazda, his company's COO, to nail down the presentation, My Steady Mind went on to take first place at the 2021 Battle of the Pitches.

"We just wanted to make sure we hit all the checkboxes of what they were looking for and then tell our story in a way that would resonate," Hickerson said.

Hickerson used the pitch competition winnings to upgrade the My Steady Mind's online platform and spent the rest on strategic marketing, which he said will be a primary focus for the company as it continues to grow.

"We're in the growth stage, so our goal for next year is to either raise money or get a loan to really focus on marketing and PR and raise awareness to let people know we're open for business," Hickerson said, adding that in the long run, he'd "like to see the My Steady Mind curriculum in every high school and college in the country as a course that they can take.

"That would mean we are providing legitimate mental health training and awareness to the masses," he added.

For veterans considering the entrepreneurship route, Hickerson said he strongly believes veterans' training from their time in the military gives them an edge in the marketplace of ideas and recommends they seek out the numerous resources Florida offers.

"I'm a big advocate for encouraging veterans to start a business," Hickerson said. "What gives veterans an edge is they're disciplined, know teamwork, are task-oriented and have communication skills that are second-to-none. But I think one of the most important things is that you can depend on them in a world where



***"Florida is very veteran-friendly. The VA system here is wonderful and having good access to facilities is a big plus. One of the biggest things is that there's just a lot of veterans here; that veteran-to-veteran brotherhood is something that's important to us."***

a lot of people aren't very dependable these days."

Hickerson continued: "If you've got that itch, I would say 'go do it' but first explore all the benefits you have as a veteran to start a business. Whether it's through organizations like Veterans Florida or Groundswell or researching funding and loan opportunities with the Small Business Administration, veterans have a ton of resources out there that most people don't have."

"We've got a competitive advantage, so don't be afraid to start your business," he added.

As a veteran who's worked and ran a business in other states, Hickerson said he sees Florida as an unmatched destination for veterans and their families.

"Florida is by far a better state for veterans," he said, adding that there are "significantly more resources and opportunities down here."

"Florida is very veteran-friendly," Hickerson said. "The VA system here is wonderful and having good access to facilities is a big plus. One of the biggest things is that there's just a lot of veterans here; that veteran-to-veteran brotherhood is something that's important to us."

And as for his decision to take a risk and start his own business, Hickerson said he's glad he took the chance and hopes to see more veterans have the opportunity to pursue their passion.

"I love it," Hickerson said, adding "I don't know if I could ever do anything else other than be an entrepreneur." ●



# ARMY VETERAN TROY UNDERWOOD ACQUIRES STEEL BUSINESS, VETERANS FLORIDA POWERS EXPANSION

*Apr. 2021*

Retired U.S. Army Reserve 1st Lieutenant Troy Underwood didn't know much about steel and metal fabrication when he acquired Tampa Steel & Supply (TSS), but that didn't stop him from reviving the flatlining steel business and turning it into one that Business Observer named among 2020's Top 500 Companies on the Gulf Coast.

Raised by a military family, Underwood assumed he'd pursue a career in the military or practice law when choosing to major in history at the University of Florida, which he attended on a ROTC scholarship.

His first foray into the building materials industry came from working part-time at a hardware store while earning his bachelor's degree. As graduation neared, he attended a UF career fair and was given an offer to go through a management training program in the paint manufacturing industry.

"They liked my leadership experience from the military and my paint knowledge from working at the hardware store," he said. "They made me an offer that was very appealing."

After accepting the offer, Underwood also began his obligation to the Army Reserve, where he served as a Transportation Officer for nearly 10 years before his retirement in 2001. During and after his military service, he amassed almost a quarter-century of

managerial experience across various building material businesses in Tampa Bay and Atlanta.

Underwood knew the former owner of TSS before accepting a position with a stoneworks company outside of Atlanta in the late 2000s, and the two discussed the possibility of Underwood managing or purchasing the steel business. But with an uncertain economic outlook at the time, Underwood passed on acquiring the business.

"Given that the economy was in the middle of a downturn at the time and that I didn't know much about the industry, I decided to stick with what I felt was a more secure fit," he said.

The Army veteran said he'd begun honing his entrepreneurial skills during the six years as Vice President with the stoneworks company but became increasingly frustrated with the inefficiencies commonly found within corporate environments.

"I worked in the corporate world and it was frustrating when I knew I could get something fixed but had to go up the rungs only for the solution to get watered down — if it got implemented at all," said Underwood, thinking that "maybe it's time to own my own business."

Wanting to move back to Tampa Bay, Underwood began seeking entrepreneurship opportunities beyond



starting a business in Florida. Rather than start from scratch, he opted instead to use capital from savings to purchase an existing business.

He reached back out to the former TSS owner, who was looking to sell the company since sales growth had fallen off following the subprime mortgage housing crisis, and the two reached an agreement where Underwood would run TSS as president for a couple of years with an option to acquire the business.

“At first I was gun shy of the building materials industry. I didn’t want to put all my eggs in one business so I started with a lease-to-own agreement to mitigate the risk,” he said. “I was very fortunate to test drive the company for a couple of years, learn the business, and see where my experience could create a dramatic improvement.”

Starting in 2014, Underwood’s leadership made an immediate impact with TSS experiencing double-digit

Kristina, who manages every department within TSS, joined him so they both benefit from the classes. All veteran and military spouses are eligible to participate alongside their significant other in the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program.

Underwood said he learned multiple ways to improve TSS from the discussions on value propositions, planning budgets, and how to take advantage of new resources. But the biggest impact came from think tank sessions where participants would break out into groups and explore ways to create new avenues of revenue and give each other feedback on ideas.

One idea that Underwood pitched was creating and selling metal art from a plasma metal cutting machine he’d recently purchased. What initially started as a small side hustle to sell military art to local veterans became Urban Metals — a division within TSS that



***“Take advantage of all the resources out there, especially if you have no experience. Attending Action Zone’s courses through the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program was tremendously beneficial.”***

percentage revenue growth over the next few years. Decisions to organize and leverage TSS’s existing customer database and improve its print and online marketing efforts paid off immediately.

After Underwood received approval for loan financing through the Small Business Administration (SBA), he took over as the TSS owner on Jan. 2, 2019 and immediately faced challenges.

Predicting revenue would be impacted by new tariffs on imported steel, he sought state resources and registered for a Florida veteran-owned business certification — a decision that led him to discover the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program.

“I thought the Entrepreneurship Program would be a great way to learn how to grow my business and face new challenges,” said Underwood, who began attending startup and growth classes with our partners at Action Zone in Oct. 2019.

But Underwood didn’t participate alone. His wife,

creates customer-designed metal art.

“Metal art was a big one for us,” Underwood said. “The course enables you to share ideas and get input from different people with different views.”

“Veterans, like Troy, make great business owners because they possess an entrepreneurial mindset and skills they often don’t realize are transferable to business development,” said Action Zone Co-Founder & Executive Director Rosie Lee. “They were trained in the military to work collaboratively, to evaluate and mitigate risks while calculating the success of the mission, and to see obstacles as challenges to overcome. All of these help a startup business succeed and thrive.”

After graduating from the program, Underwood was prepared to overcome the next hurdle: COVID-19. In addition to focusing more on metal art to make up for the slowdown in production from steel mills, he also ramped up TSS’s website and social media



***“Whether it’s hiring lawyers, financial advisors, or industry experts — you’re not going to know it all. Taking those steps makes the learning curve a little less steep and a little less expensive. I didn’t know everything about steel, but I hired people who did.”***

presence to cater to customers avoiding in-person transactions.

The decisions paid off: TSS didn’t lay off any of its 19 employees and more than a year after the pandemic began, Underwood said the business was having its best months in revenue since before the tariff took effect.

With new steel mills opening in Central Florida, the future appears bright as Underwood stated he plans to double the TSS’s size by 2025 and double again by the end of the decade by continuing to expand the businesses’ diverse customer base, which already includes anyone from sole proprietorships to major clients, such as the City of Tampa, Amalie Arena — home of the NHL’s Tampa Bay Lightning — Amazon, and SpaceX.

Underwood said he believes Florida is a great state for veteran entrepreneurs to acquire or start a business and praised the state for supporting its businesses and how it worked to keep them from permanently closing their doors during the pandemic.

“Florida has a strong economy and a very business-friendly environment,” Underwood said, adding that it’s great “the state recognizes areas where it needs to get stronger, like in manufacturing so it doesn’t rely so heavily on tourism.”

Underwood encourages veterans seeking to purchase or start a business to spend time in the

company or industry, learn the inputs, and understand the opportunity. He also advises using all available resources, surrounding yourself with the right people, and pursuing ownership in an industry where you can discover your passion.

“Take advantage of all the resources out there, especially if you have no experience,” Underwood said. “Attending Action Zone’s courses through the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program was tremendously beneficial.”

“At the end of the day, if you don’t have knowledge of the industry you’re in then you’ve got to find someone who knows it,” he said. “I’m fortunate to have an ad hoc list of advisors to rely on. Whether it’s hiring lawyers, financial advisors, or industry experts — you’re not going to know it all. Taking those steps makes the learning curve a little less steep and a little less expensive. I didn’t know everything about steel, but I hired people who did.”

Underwood says his passion for steel didn’t happen overnight but developed over time, adding that he’s proud of the culture he’s created within the company and is confident they’re prepared to weather any storm.

“Every day it’s either my wedding or my funeral,” Underwood said. “But that’s one of the drivers to running a business.” ●





# VETERANS FLORIDA CAREER SERVICES

*Career Assistance & Placement in Florida's Leading Industries*

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## ARMY VETERAN DERRICK FISHBACK USES SKILLBRIDGE TO LAND TECHNOLOGY CAREER, SUPPORT FLORIDA INITIATIVE

Mar. 2021

Retired U.S. Army Colonel Derrick Fishback knows firsthand the importance of improving the process of transitioning servicemembers from public service to the private sector.

“I’ve seen so many people struggle up this mountain,” he said of the transition period. “You’re not going to stay in the military forever. Everyone eventually leaves and you need to develop a plan at least two years out for what you’re going to do when that day comes.”

Spanning 32 years, Fishback transitioned out of the Army twice. His first exit came in the mid-90s when there were little to no civilian training programs

in place for transitioning servicemembers, which he described as essentially “Do you want to join the National Guard and be a pilot?” with an added “have a nice day” if you declined.

Stationed in Pensacola, Florida with three years remaining in his 23-year military service, he began planning his second transition. Wanting to pursue a career in information technology, Fishback happened upon the only Hiring Our Heroes job transition seminar held during that time and learned about the DOD SkillBridge program.

The U.S. Department of Defense established the SkillBridge program to provide active-duty personnel

— of any rank and from all branches — the opportunity to gain hands-on civilian work experience through apprenticeships or internships during the last 6 months of their military service if they receive commander approval.

SkillBridge participants continue receiving their military compensation and benefits during the training period and have a high probability of post-service employment either with the initial provider or other employers in an industry-related field.

Because there were no SkillBridge opportunities in his field in Florida, Fishback had to go to Georgia to find IT fellowship partners; one of which was IBM, and after four interviews within four different departments at their Atlanta office, Fishback received the “yes” he’d been looking for.

“I knew that I needed to have applicable skills after retiring from the Army,” he said. “A 12-week corporate fellowship was a perfect way to do that.”

Over the next three months, Fishback gained hands-on experience as a Program Manager leading

“Put yourself in a position to win,” Fishback said, adding that transitioning servicemembers need to structure their calendars for civilian training to get ahead. “Break up the cycle of military stuff,” he says. “If you don’t, you’re like everyone else who walks through their door.”

Three interviews later and AWS offered him the job. Fishback accepted the full-time position with the added benefit of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing him to stay in Pensacola which he said, “has the added bonus of helping to contribute to the growth of the community.”

Nearly a year into his job, Fishback accepted an additional duty of Director of Veteran Recruiting within his division at AWS “to bring more veterans on board because Amazon realizes the long-term value.”

“The math has been proven: When you have veterans on the staff, the company performs better,” said Fishback, citing LinkedIn and ZipRecruiter/Call of Duty Endowment studies and adding that the increased productivity and improved team morale



***“SkillBridge is a stepping stone to where you want to go.”***



a cross-functional development team in IBM’s Watson division. Tasked with working on and delivering the company’s question-answering artificial intelligence to businesses around the country, the retired Army colonel was given the chance to combine his leadership experience from the military with on-the-job civilian technical skills.

“Your credentials do matter,” he said, emphasizing that military experience will only get you so far with employers. “In the military I would say ‘I led this many soldiers as colonel’ and that would be enough. But an interviewer will say to me ‘Great! That’s point one — you need 100 more points.’”

Even though IBM guaranteed him an interview once he completed the internship, Fishback would soon receive a phone call from Amazon Web Services — the market leader in cloud computing. Having previously submitted a resume for a lower position, AWS now wanted Fishback to interview for a higher role of Engagement Manager after seeing he’d obtained industry-related experience through SkillBridge.

fosters positive results across the board and “creates a different mindset and work ethic that gets embedded in the entire staff.”

Fishback’s success didn’t come without hurdles. Aside from seeking an out-of-state employer, he recalled that most at the leadership level didn’t know about SkillBridge and some even told him the “program is not meant for you, just for younger people.”

“The goal should not be to discourage participation, but to inform the servicemember of the benefit and encourage them to apply,” he added.

Educating both commanders and employers on SkillBridge is critical to ensuring servicemembers can take advantage of the program.

In June 2021, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed House Bill 435, creating the nation’s first statewide SkillBridge initiative. The legislation designated Veterans Florida as the state’s primary SkillBridge organization tasked with building awareness, assisting employers in developing trainings and obtaining approvals, and connecting servicemembers with



SkillBridge opportunities.

Fishback supported Florida creating a statewide SkillBridge initiative and saw it as an all-around benefit to servicemembers, businesses, and the state. He added that he couldn't have achieved the level of career success in such a short time without going through the SkillBridge program and knew the program's increased

visibility would allow more servicemembers to get their foot in the door.

"The program is a great way to help servicemembers transition both personally and professionally," Fishback said, adding that ultimately "SkillBridge is a stepping stone to where you want to go." ●



## UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA EQUIPS VETERANS TO ENTER CAREERS IN FLORIDA'S CYBERSECURITY INDUSTRY

Apr. 2022

As cyber-attacks become more widespread with new threats emerging every day, the demand for cybersecurity professionals has never been greater. And as usual, Florida's at the front lines of the solution.

The University of West Florida's Center for Cybersecurity spearheaded a national coalition with Cyber Florida at the University of South Florida, Florida International University, and seven other institutions to equip veterans and transitioning servicemembers with the skills and certifications to start and advance cybersecurity careers.

"There is a critical shortage of qualified cybersecurity professionals, and across the country, we have over 500,000 unfilled cybersecurity jobs," said Dr. Eman El-Sheikh, associate vice president for the UWF Center for Cybersecurity, adding there are more than 30,000 openings in Florida with an average starting salary of \$68,000. "UWF took the lead on putting together a national cybersecurity workforce program with the idea of finding, developing, and offering alternative ways to help veterans and servicemembers get into cybersecurity."

Dr. El-Sheikh continued: "We recognize that no

matter what we as a university, state, or country do to get people into degree programs, it would never be enough because cybersecurity is such an evolving field where we hear about new threats daily."

Designated as the National Centers of Academic Excellence in Cybersecurity (NCAE-C) by the National Security Agency, the UWF-led coalition created the CyberSkills2Work Program to rapidly expand the cybersecurity workforce in critical infrastructures such as defense, finance, and energy.

Dr. El-Sheikh said coalition members will train and place more than 1,650 veterans and transitioning servicemembers into cybersecurity jobs over the next two years and added many that already have sought-after soft skills from their time in the service, and only need the hard skills to get their foot in the door.

"Florida has a high number of transitioning military and veterans, and they bring great skills and expertise to jobs that are needed in cybersecurity," Dr. El-Sheikh said. "Many of the jobs have underlying, common requirements: critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. Our nation's heroes, by the nature of what they've done through their

***“Florida has a high number of transitioning military and veterans, and they bring great skills and expertise to jobs that are needed in cybersecurity.”***

**— Dr. Eman El-Sheikh, UWF Associate VP**



service, have all been in environments where they have those skills, and what they need are the technical skills in cybersecurity which is what we’re providing them.”

At the UWF Center for Cybersecurity, the UWF CyberSkills2Work Program provides free cybersecurity training and job placement assistance to veterans and transitioning servicemembers and offers two pathways based on prior experience: System Administrator and Cyber Defense Analyst.

The System Administrator Pathway is a seven-month, five-course training designed for those with little to no cybersecurity experience and includes prep courses and vouchers for industry certifications like CompTIA A+, CompTIA Network+, CompTIA Linux+, and CompTIA Security+.

For those with some cybersecurity experience and looking to advance their career in the industry, the Cyber Defense Analyst Pathway is a three-month, four-course training that includes courses on Network Defense Fundamentals, Advance Network Defense, Threat Intelligence, and IBM Security Operations Center in Practice.

UWF Center for Cybersecurity Program Coordinator Mónica Respondek said in addition to the UWF CyberSkills2Work Program’s training and vouchers, the program includes numerous benefits: credit hours to apply towards a degree, integration with the Florida CyberRange, one-on-one career support with employer matching, networking with other participants, and awarding digital badges upon completion.

“We have an amazing faculty that wants their

participants to be successful, and our goal is to accommodate and support veterans and transitioning military in their journey,” Respondek said, adding it’s a chance “to start something new and not have to break the bank, take out a loan, or get more in debt. It’s an opportunity that’s free to those who’ve served our country.”

As a military spouse who relocated from California, Respondek said she knows firsthand the impact cost of living can have on military families. With free resources like the UWF CyberSkills2Work Program, overall affordability, and limitless opportunities, she said Florida is an unparalleled state for veterans and transitioning servicemembers to launch a cybersecurity career.

“If transitioning military or veterans want to start a career in cybersecurity, then Florida is the place to do it,” Respondek said.

The UWF Center for Cybersecurity also offers other cybersecurity programs at no cost to veterans and transitioning servicemembers, including the Cybersecurity Education in Critical Infrastructure Protection Program to equip them with the skills to defend and protect our critical infrastructures as well as the Faculty Development Program to learn fundamentals and provide training to the next generation of cybersecurity professionals.

For veterans and transitioning servicemembers interested in the UWF CyberSkills2Work Program or other cybersecurity programs offered by the university, visit the UWF Center for Cybersecurity Workforce Development page to see all the available programs or contact [cybersecurity@uwf.edu](mailto:cybersecurity@uwf.edu) to learn more. ●



***“If transitioning military or veterans want to start a career in cybersecurity, then Florida is the place to do it.”***

**— Mónica Respondek, UWF Cyber Program Coordinator**





# ARMY VETERAN MATTHEW HALL JUMPSTARTS LAW ENFORCEMENT CAREER WITH VETERANS FLORIDA, FHP SKILLBRIDGE INTERNSHIP

Jan. 2022

Former U.S. Army Specialist Matthew Hall needed to get his foot in the door to pursue a passion for law enforcement and enrolled in the Veterans Florida, Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) SkillBridge internship — successfully easing his transition back to civilian life and putting him one step closer to achieving his career goal of becoming a state trooper.

Born and raised in Panama City, FL, Hall recalled how the get-togethers throughout his childhood with one of his father's best friends, a former K-9 officer at the Bay County Sheriff's Office, initially piqued his interest in law enforcement and police dogs. Additionally, seeing the harmful impact drugs had on the community during Spring Break strengthened his desire to turn a growing passion into a career.

"I've just always had something in me that was a passion for law enforcement," he said. "Seeing the amount of destruction drugs and things like that caused where I grew up, and the effects it can have on friends and families; they get caught up in it because of how prevalent it was in that area."

"I want to help clean it up and keep it off the streets," Hall added. "That's something near and dear to me."

Hall said he had a calling to join the military and enlisted with the Army in 2017. While serving as a combat medic stationed at Fort Stewart and then at Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia, he also attended Georgia Southern University and took an interest in investigating human trafficking upon reading *In the Name of the Children* by retired FBI Special Agent Jeffrey L. Rinek.

"It was one of those things that hit deep," Hall said. "I wanted to know if I could make an impact like that; to stop predators and bring families back together or at least bring justice to somebody who wronged them and make a difference."

Hall graduated with a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and Criminology around the time he began planning his transition back to civilian life to pursue a law enforcement career and spend more time with his family. Though he was considering several states, he'd soon find an opportunity that no state came close to offering and let him return to Florida.

During the Army's Transition Assistance Program (TAP), a Navy veteran came and spoke to Hall and other transitioning servicemembers about DOD SkillBridge — a program enabling active-duty servicemembers with commander approval to gain work experience with employers within six months of separating or retiring from the military while also maintaining DOD salary and benefits during the training period.

Veterans Florida partnered with FHP in March 2021, creating the nation's first statewide law enforcement SkillBridge training for separating and

retiring servicemembers, where the mission is to place participants in sworn and non-sworn positions at FHP upon completion of their military service.

Stationed in Georgia and looking at postings from other states, Hall came across the Veterans Florida listing for FHP's Region Field Officer internship on the DOD SkillBridge website. Upon learning the opportunity provided a path to becoming a state trooper and favoring the benefits of living in Florida, the decision to return home to the Sunshine State was an easy one to make.

"I just looked at it as a whole: What's going to be better for my career, what's going to be better for my family, and what's going to be good for entertainment," Hall said. "I enjoy the weather, and me and my kids love fishing and the beach. You have all the different attractions and amusement parks and with no state income taxes, great veterans programs, and one of the best states in terms of retirement — there's just a lot that Florida has to offer."

After getting accepted into the program in August, Hall moved to Jacksonville and spent the next 14 weeks training on-the-job as a dispatcher at the FHP Jacksonville Regional Communications Center

(JRCC). His internship included hands-on training for dispatcher consoles and learning all of the 10-codes and signals required to efficiently communicate through the radio in addition to gaining a better understanding of state and federal laws.

"I have a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, but I didn't understand the lingo or how law enforcement actually works," Hall said. "A college degree doesn't necessarily mean that you know how to become a cop or know how cops operate."

With an eye towards becoming a sworn officer, Hall also participated in a ride-along and received guidance and valuable insight about the position from troopers. And seeing how troopers have to tune out the background noise while working in the field and relay back to JRCC was an eye-opening experience.

"It's two different worlds in a sense, and unless you've seen both sides of it you don't really understand what the other person is dealing with," Hall said, adding that both troopers and dispatchers could greatly benefit from seeing the pressures from the other side and believes his time as a dispatcher better prepare him to become a state trooper.

Hall completed his SkillBridge internship in November and FHP immediately offered him the full-time dispatcher position at JRCC. Potentially getting a job offer upon completion and having a clear path toward becoming a state trooper were the deciding factors for Hall when choosing the FHP SkillBridge internship over other law enforcement opportunities during his transition.

"To go through the SkillBridge program and come out with a guaranteed job and income with a state agency that is willing to work with you and help you become a state trooper; for me, the decision was a no-brainer," Hall said, adding that through the FHP internship "I was able to train, learn, and take all of my courses that I needed so after I went back to complete out-processing with the Army, I was literally able to start a full-time job two days later."

Colonel Gene S. Spaulding, Director of the Florida Highway Patrol, sees a bright future for other servicemembers easing their transition with careers in law enforcement, a natural fit for many veterans.

"The Florida Highway Patrol applauds Matthew Hall for being the first member to complete the FHP SkillBridge program — the nation's first statewide law enforcement SkillBridge program," Col. Spaulding said. "By continuing our great partnership with Veterans Florida, I am certain there will be many more success stories like Matthew's. These members served our country honorably, and will be a valuable asset to Florida's workforce."

Hall said he's using the opportunity as a stepping



***"The biggest thing for me was the attentiveness from everyone at Veterans Florida and FHP. [Both] working synergistically provided a good overall experience throughout the whole process."***



stone to apply to the FHP Training Academy, where if accepted he'll complete seven months of training to be sworn in as a state trooper. In addition, he's currently in the process of joining the Army National Guard and applying as a Commissioned Officer Candidate, stating he wasn't ready to completely let go and wanted to earn a commission.

After graduating from the academy and working as a state trooper for a couple of years, Hall ultimately wants to move up to the FHP Criminal Interdiction Unit (CIU), a group of specially trained troopers designated as felony officers and canine handlers tasked with stopping drug and human trafficking on Florida's interstate highways.

Outside of the training, Hall praised Veterans Florida and FHP for quickly responding to any request, making the program flexible to meet his timeline, and coordinating to get the training approved by his commander.

"The biggest thing for me was the attentiveness from everyone at Veterans Florida and FHP. [Both] working synergistically provided a good overall

experience throughout the whole process," Hall said. "A lot of time there were these stale moments where I was waiting to hear back from my chain of command, the CSP coordinators, or about signing off my paperwork, but it never failed that Andrea, Kolby, Major Gaston, or Laura would reach out to me to make sure that everything was good and to see if they could help out in any way to get the program approved and get it rolling."

Hall highly recommends the FHP SkillBridge internship to any separating and retiring servicemember; whether to become a sworn or non-sworn officer or utilize and further develop military skills, such as becoming a pilot in the Aviation Unit, the state agency's training provides a clear path into a law enforcement career.

"It's a really good opportunity for any soldier wanting to go into law enforcement, especially if you're not familiar with it at all," Hall said. "I'm in a career field that I want to be in and it was a smooth transition for me — and I'm better prepared to go into the trooper academy." ●



## RETIRING AIR FORCE F-16 MAINTAINER OVIDIO GONZALEZ TAPS INTO SKILLBRIDGE TO LAUNCH POST-SERVICE AVIATION CAREER IN FLORIDA

Feb. 2022

Few individuals know more about the F-16 Fighting Falcon than U.S. Air Force Technical Sergeant Ovidio Gonzalez. Having accumulated nearly two decades of experience maintaining one of the world's most innovative military aircraft, he decided it was time for a new challenge and reached out to Veterans Florida to begin his transition and enroll in the Piper Aircraft

SkillBridge internship to launch his post-service aviation career in Florida.

"After nearly twenty years in the military I just felt it was time for a change," Gonzalez said of his decision to retire from the Air Force. "I was content with everything that I achieved up to that point, and honestly, I was just ready to try something new."

A native of Palm Bay, FL, Gonzalez joined the military after positive discussions with a retired Air Force veteran visiting his junior college. Assigned as an F-16 aircraft mechanic at his first duty station at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany, his nearly 20-year military service spanned over multiple countries in North America, Europe, and Asia; included deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan; and culminated in his final station at Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina, where he first learned about the U.S. Department of Defense SkillBridge Program.

“Through multiple briefings and word-of-mouth from peers, I was introduced to the SkillBridge Program,” he said. “Where I was stationed, the commanders were good about relaying information and multiple opportunities to the members in the event that they were thinking of separating or retiring. Once I knew about it and went into TAPs, it opened the door to allow me to ask specific questions and get details on how exactly the program works.”

Gonzalez continued: “At first, I couldn’t believe it, and I thought there had to be some type of catch. Once it was explained to me and I understood how the

SkillBridge Program worked, I thought it was amazing the Air Force would allow me the opportunity to do that.”

SkillBridge enables active-duty servicemembers with commander approval to gain work experience with employers within six months of separating or retiring from the military. SkillBridge participants maintain their DOD salary and benefits during the training period.

With his retirement date set for June 1, 2022, and a desire to return to Florida to be close to his family, Gonzalez began searching for aircraft mechanic opportunities on the SkillBridge website and discovered Veterans Florida, the state’s designated SkillBridge assistance organization, who connected him with the Senior Mechanic Supervisor internship with Piper Aircraft.

Piper Aircraft flew Gonzalez from South Carolina to its Vero Beach campus, and after taking a tour of the factory, he enrolled in the SkillBridge internship and started the training in December — giving him the opportunity to apply his skills from the Air Force to a new career pursuit and transition back home to Florida.

Gonzalez started his internship from his main area of expertise, the flight line, where he ran function tests, performed maintenance, and conducted final inspections on the company’s Cherokee and Malibu aircraft families to ensure certification by the Federal Aviation Administration leading up to the customer’s purchase.

“As a fighter aircraft mechanic with almost twenty years on F-16’s, I was able to take everything that I’ve learned; whether it was the hands-on maintenance portion or overall supervisory portion and transition over to Piper,” Gonzalez said. “It’s been pretty effortless and simple because I’ve done it for so long that it’s just a matter of getting accustomed to new guidance and technical data to perform tasks. A lot of the concepts are similar if not the same.”

From the flight line, Gonzalez’s training expanded to various departments, such as the construction of different plane components, within Piper Aircraft to allow him to become acclimated with all the inner workings of the aircraft manufacturer.

“They’re moving me around to different departments within the actual building facility to see the other side of how airplanes are built; things like structural build-up that I don’t normally see on a day-to-day or have experience with as a flight line mechanic,” Gonzalez said. “The construction and build-up are completely brand new to me. It’s given me the opportunity to become familiar with the overall functions of the company and learn how an aircraft is

***“[Veterans Florida and Piper Aircraft] literally made the process extremely easy for me, especially being in another state at the time. The effort they put in to steer me into the program was honestly amazing.”***





pretty much built from scratch.”

Navy veteran and Piper Aircraft Senior Director of Manufacturing Greg Wendel first learned about SkillBridge from a transitioning Marine and reached out to Veterans Florida VETS Services Director Jeremy Sinnemaki to implement internships at the company for transitioning servicemembers.

“The support that Jeremy provided was fantastic,” Wendel said. “He guided us through the entire process, answered all our questions, assisted with understanding the requirements, and introduced Piper Aircraft to the Veterans Florida support teams we’d be working with.”

Wendel said he designed the 4-6 month SkillBridge training to give servicemembers the full breadth of their entire operation, allowing them to gravitate to the senior aircraft mechanic and manufacturing supervision positions where they feel most comfortable in one or more of the company’s 32 departments.

Ultimately, Wendel said it’s Piper Aircraft’s mission to hire servicemembers who complete the internship and further develop their skills to ensure they have a long, rewarding career at the company.

“Our goal is to get candidates, like Ovidio, ready to enter our workforce and excel on day one,” Wendel said. “We want candidates to understand our company and culture as well as embrace our mission, then find a good fit within our team where they can launch a long career with Piper Aircraft. We have a need for high-performing technicians and mechanics as well as leaders, so regardless of the avenue they pursue, there are plenty of opportunities.”

Once the internship ends in May, Gonzalez said he’ll use his remaining leave time leading up to his retirement and hopes to continue working at Piper Aircraft upon completing his military service. In the long term, he’d like to finish his aviation maintenance bachelor’s degree from Embry Riddle University and advance his career at Piper Aircraft.

“My biggest takeaway from the Piper internship is that it’s a company striving to take care of their people and in the process build some amazing quality airplanes,” he said.

Gonzalez said he strongly recommends the SkillBridge internship in large part because of how well Wendel from Piper Aircraft and Andrea Marteeny from the Veterans Florida VETS team relayed information to him and ensured everything got squared away during the process.

Gonzalez said he’s fortunate to have discovered SkillBridge before entering the Air Force’s Transition Assistance Program and hopes more servicemembers will take advantage of the program’s immense benefits. For transitioning servicemembers considering



***“As a fighter aircraft mechanic with almost twenty years on F-16’s, I was able to take everything that I’ve learned; whether it was the hands-on maintenance portion or overall supervisory portion and transition over to Piper.”***

enrolling in a SkillBridge internship for aerospace and aviation or any other industry, he recommends starting the search as early as possible and brushing up on civilian interviewing skills.

“There’s a lot of opportunities out there, so I would advise them to first and foremost start early,” Gonzalez said. “Definitely give yourself the opportunity to become familiar with the SkillBridge site and get a feel for how it works.”

He continued: “Once you do that, come up with a good game plan for how you intend to present yourself. In my case, I completely forgot how to do any of that because I’d been working for the military for so long. Sharpen up on your interviewing and understand you’re speaking to a different audience from then military when you’re going up for a civilian job.”

From the warm weather to the abundance of aerospace and aviation companies, Gonzalez said he believes Florida is an attractive landing spot and offers myriad opportunities for separating and retiring servicemembers to launch their post-service career.

“The opportunities are far greater in Florida than a lot of other areas,” Gonzalez said. “I can go from working on an airplane or something in the aviation field to deciding whether I want to go to the beach or Disney World — I think that’s pretty great; living the good life as a retiree.” ●



# THE FLORIDA SPACE COAST: AMERICA'S AEROSPACE HUB

*Jan. 2021*

The Apollo 11 moon landing. The first-ever crewed commercial spaceflight from SpaceX docking at the International Space Station. The footage of those feats is iconic, and it all started on Florida's Space Coast.

Florida has stood at the forefront of aerospace innovation since the beginning, and veterans working in the industry have accomplished things once thought to be impossible and transformed the Space Coast into the nation's premier aerospace hub.

Located approximately 35 miles east of Orlando, Space Coast stretches over 72 miles of the Atlantic Coastline with most of the region found within Brevard County where 20% of the population are active duty, veterans, and their families.

Today, the Space Coast economy is booming as companies invest billions of dollars across a variety of aerospace sectors in recent decades, leading to unprecedented manufacturing job growth that's 2.8 times the U.S. average as the space race to Mars and beyond heats up.

"Florida's Space Coast is the world's premier gateway for civil, defense and commercial space. However, its prowess now extends beyond launch to the engineering and production of rockets, spacecraft, aircraft, payload and electronics, and ground support," said Lynda L. Weatherman, president and CEO of the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space

Coast. "The biggest names in aerospace, including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, L3Harris, Northrop Grumman, Embraer, United Launch Alliance, SpaceX, and Blue Origin have chosen Brevard County to locate operations and executive leadership because it serves their missions, bottom lines, and workforce."

Florida is an undisputed national and global leader in the aerospace industry, which contributes more than \$20 billion to the local economy each year. The state ranks #2 in the U.S. for the number of aerospace and aviation establishments and is home to more than 17,000 aerospace-related companies that employ 130,000 Floridians. The Space Coast is the epicenter of human space flight and manufacturing with more than one-third of the state's aerospace employees working in the region.

And Space Coast's aerospace companies offer more opportunities than just the development of space vehicles and rockets. Researchers, engineers, and manufacturers of aircraft, guided missiles, and satellites are also prominent sectors. Overall, Florida's aerospace careers pay an average salary of \$95,000 annually. And remember: Florida residents pay no state income taxes.

Growing opportunities and sustainable employment aren't the only things Space Coast has to offer. Annually ranked as one of the top places to live





*“The biggest names in aerospace, including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, L3Harris, Northrop Grumman, Embraer, United Launch Alliance, SpaceX, and Blue Origin have chosen Brevard County to locate operations and executive leadership because it serves their missions, bottom lines, and workforce.”*

Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin recently finished construction on a rocket manufacturing facility where hundreds of local aerospace employees are now assembling the New Glenn, which is scheduled to launch in 2021. Plans include a further expansion of the facilities and considering the 50-year lease with NASA, it’s safe to say Blue Origin’s Space Coast operations won’t be going anywhere anytime soon.

L3Harris Technologies, headquartered in Melbourne, is the largest aerospace and defense company in Florida and a top 10 defense company worldwide, generating \$17 billion in annual revenue. L3Harris employs more than 7,000 in Central Florida where the contractor focuses on its Space & Airborne and Integrated Missions divisions in Palm Bay, which plans to modernize and sustain infrastructure for the U.S. Space Force.

Lockheed Martin employs more than 9,000 people across its Orlando and Space Coast campuses. Rocket and missile development are Lockheed Martin’s primary focus in the region, and they expanded its Fleet Ballistic Missile headquarters in Titusville and won a contract with NASA to assemble the Orion spacecraft — both adding hundreds of new aerospace jobs to the area.

For more than six decades Boeing has been one of Space Coast’s most vital manufacturers and took a big step in 2019 by relocating its Space and Launch division headquarters from Arlington, Virginia to Titusville to meet the growing demand for spacecraft and satellite launches from the region. Boeing also operates a joint venture with Lockheed Martin known as the United Launch Alliance, which launched six of its Atlas V and Delta IV-Heavy rockets into orbit in 2020.

Northrop Grumman arrived on the Space Coast in the 1960s and its aerospace engineers immediately made history by creating the Apollo Lunar Module, the first spacecraft to land a man on the moon. With more than 4,000 employees in the region, Northrop Grumman is working alongside Lockheed Martin and Boeing to assist NASA in constructing the Space Launch System — the world’s most powerful rocket that will send astronauts back to the moon in 2024. ●

in the country by the U.S. News & World Report, Space Coast boasts 73-degree annual average temperatures, a brief 23-minute average commute time, and an affordable median home price of \$213,000.

The need for a skilled workforce has never been greater on the Space Coast and veterans are in high demand. Here are some of the region’s major aerospace employers.

NASA needs aerospace engineers, scientists, technologists, and technicians to accomplish its most ambitious missions of the 21st century: Sending the first woman and next man on the Moon by 2024, landing humans on an asteroid by 2025, and ultimately, taking the next giant leap to Mars in the 2030s.

Founded by Elon Musk, SpaceX employs thousands of people from the Space Coast and is the catalyst for the region’s sustained economic growth, becoming the first private company to capitalize on its aerospace infrastructure by leasing two orbital launch sites from NASA. With a massive expansion of rocket facilities potentially on the horizon and after a record-setting 2020 with 24 missions reaching orbit, SpaceX’s future on the Space Coast couldn’t be brighter.



## SERVICEMEMBERS TAKE FLIGHT, PREPARE FOR FLORIDA AVIATION CAREERS WITH LEGENDS AIRWAYS SKILLBRIDGE INTERNSHIP

Mar. 2022

The demand for pilots and aviation professionals has never been greater, and Lakeland-based international cargo airline Legends Airways created a SkillBridge internship to give retiring and separating servicemembers the opportunity to become pilots or enter a variety of career positions within Florida's aviation industry.

Florida Air National Guard Senior Airman Justin Dal Colletto is the Flight School Director at Legends Airways and creator of the aviation SkillBridge internship at the airlines' flight school, Legends Aviation Academy. After seeing industry forecasts showing a shortage in the coming years, he began looking for a way the airline could create a pipeline of new aviation talent.

"We're facing an unprecedented pilot shortage that's never been seen before," Dal Colletto said, citing Boeing's pilot and technician outlook report. "The demand for pilots and aviation professionals is higher than it's ever been. Your major airlines all have a mandatory retirement age of 65 years old, so we're having a lot of pilots hit their mandatory retirement age. However, we're not recruiting enough pilots to fill those seats and replace them."

Dal Colletto recalled first hearing about SkillBridge while serving in the Guard and started researching the program after seeing it on a LinkedIn community board. Upon learning what the program entailed, he went to work creating a proposal to train transitioning servicemembers to jumpstart their aviation career in Florida.

"I noticed there weren't a lot of aviation or pilot

SkillBridge programs out there, let alone programs available in the state of Florida," Dal Colletto said. "That's what led me to start drafting the MOU [Memorandum of Understanding with DOD] back in August of 2021. From there, we eventually received our approval and launched the program in September."

SkillBridge enables active-duty servicemembers with commander approval to gain work experience with employers within six months of separating or retiring from the military and maintain their DOD salary and benefits during the training period.

Dal Colletto said he modeled the airline's SkillBridge internship after their civilian pipeline program, so whether a servicemember has zero experience or twenty years experience in aviation, the training covers new topics the participants have never explored before.

"We set out to establish a program that took a very well-rounded approach to commercial and civilian aviation to give transitioning servicemembers from any background as much exposure as possible to the industry in all different facets," Dal Colletto said. "Once they transition out of service, not only will they've received valuable experience working on ground operations, dispatch, and training, but they'll also have additional exposure of piloting and flying that they'll be able to take to any career field post-separation. With us being a cargo airline and a flight school, not only are we the training organization but we're also the end-goal employer."

The Legends Airways SkillBridge internship is split into three tracks: wingman, pilot, and aviation



mechanic. Participants in the Wingman Track are instructed by aviation and aerospace industry leaders and receive hands-on training in each of the airline's departments, including dispatch, flight following, maintenance, training, and the academy.

Servicemembers interested in earning a pilot's license have the opportunity to enroll in the Academy's Pilot-Training Track, with options ranging from private licenses all the way to commercial pilot. Legends offers SkillBridge participants subsidies to off-set costs associated with the training, such as fuel and examiner fees.

In partnership with Veterans Florida, Dal Colletto worked with VETS Program Director Jeremy Sinnemaki to develop the third track for the Legends Airways SkillBridge internship: the Aviation Mechanic Track, which is designed for servicemembers with a background in the field and encompasses diagnosing mechanical or electrical issues as well as repairing or replacing aircraft components.

"Veterans Florida has many years of experience placing servicemembers into careers in the Sunshine State and it was a natural partnership that allows us to continue growing our program and attract dedicated and qualified individuals," he said. "With Florida taking the lead on SkillBridge, the state is helping employers and companies such as ourselves find highly qualified individuals to join our team and has recognized the quality, integrity, and the drive that is found within an American servicemember."

Dal Colletto added: "As a servicemember myself

working for a veteran-friendly company, we are beyond humbled that servicemembers would consider us to be part of such a huge step in their life transitioning out of the service and we're honored to recruit and train the future of Florida's workforce."

Legends Airways' first graduate of the SkillBridge internship is U.S. Navy Lieutenant Paxie Cordova, who flew maritime patrol aircraft during his 12-year military service. Having not flown for a few years prior to his transition, he saw the program as an opportunity to get back in the pilot seat and be near his home in Jacksonville.

"I applied to Legends to get back in the game and help me get into the Reserve squadrons by showing that I'm currently flying," Cordova said. "It's worked out great; way better than I was shooting for. Once I started with them and they realized that I had flight experience from the Navy, the internship got cut short, and I just started up flying for them full-time instead."

For servicemembers without any experience, Cordova said the airline is a great opportunity to get a foot in the door.

"Legends Airways is a very promising company for any servicemember who's ready to commit to a lifelong career in aviation," Cordova said.

Separating and retiring servicemembers interested in the Legends Airways SkillBridge internship or have questions about the program can contact VETS Program Director Jeremy Sinnemaki at [sinnemaki@veteransflorida.org](mailto:sinnemaki@veteransflorida.org). ●

*"With Florida taking the lead on SkillBridge, the state is helping employers and companies such as ourselves find highly qualified individuals to join our team and has recognized the quality, integrity, and the drive that is found within an American servicemember."*

*— Justin Dal Colletto, Legends Airways Flight School Director*



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Mar. 2021

### ARMY VETERAN CHARLENE LAMOUNTAIN FORGES NEW CAREER PATH THROUGH SKILLBRIDGE, VETERANS FLORIDA AGRICULTURE PROGRAM



U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Charlene LaMountain needed a change of pace — but not a change in scenery.

After serving 20 years in the Army's public affairs and communications divisions, from the Pentagon to U.S. Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, LaMountain "crunched the numbers" and chose to retire in Florida.

"Florida is very veteran-friendly," she said, recalling how she didn't realize how welcoming Florida is to veterans until moving here. The state's numerous benefits and no taxes on military retirement helped seal the deal.

"Nothing appealed to me like Florida," LaMountain said. "Retiring here was a no-brainer."

Following her decision to retire in Florida, LaMountain entered the Army's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and during the four-hour, more than 200-slide presentation, a one-liner caught her by surprise: DOD SkillBridge.

Charlene LaMountain promoted to Lieutenant Colonel at Bay Palms Golf Complex on MacDill AFB.

"When the SkillBridge slide popped up, I had to do a double-take," she recalled, thinking to herself: "So the Army is going to pay me to work at a company — Did I read that right?"

The DOD SkillBridge Program enables active-duty servicemembers with commander approval to gain work experience through internships, fellowships, and apprenticeships with employers within six months of separating or retiring from the military. SkillBridge participants maintain their DOD salary and benefits during the training period.



LaMountain knew little about the program until the TAP presentation, having only briefly heard the word “SkillBridge” mentioned by some of her peers who’d recently transitioned out of the Army.

“I knew there were tons of programs for people who were already out [of the military] but didn’t know there were programs for work-related internships,” she added.

Even though LaMountain holds a Master’s Degree in Engineering Management and accumulated decades of military experience in public affairs, she saw SkillBridge as an opportunity to branch out and start a new career after having “lived in a cubicle farm.”

Most people may not know it’s very common for transitioning servicemembers to seek a different career path. In fact, LaMountain is in the majority of about 55% of veterans who say they want to pursue different careers than the ones they had in the military, according to a LinkedIn Veteran Opportunity Report.

“I wanted to maximize the benefit of the program, so I avoided things that I already knew how to do,” she said.

LaMountain discovered Veterans Florida on the DOD SkillBridge website and learned about the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program, which partners with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) to offer veterans a six-month fellowship to gain hands-on experience in Florida’s agriculture industry.

“Transitioning servicemembers and veterans possess a one-of-a-kind skill set that’s a natural fit for an agriculture career,” said Dr. Gary Vallad, Associate Professor of Plant Pathology at UF/IFAS. “Veterans will play a vital role in building Florida’s agriculture workforce for years to come.”

LaMountain said she’s always had a deep appreciation for agriculture and saw the program’s fellowship as an opportunity to understand the intricacies of farming and raising crops

“Growing organic food, using food as medicine, and conservation of the environment are already in line with things I believe,” she said, adding that the

hard work that goes into growing our food means “at the very least you’ll be a few pounds lighter.”

Since her enrollment in November 2020 at the UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Wimauma, LaMountain’s fellowship has covered a wide array of agriculture topics and techniques, such as examining fungal growth in Petri dishes and isolating pathogens.

“I really enjoy it. Every day I’m learning something new about agriculture,” LaMountain said of her time in the program. “There’s nothing I can compare it to in the military.”

LaMountain has also taken an interest in the economic side of the agriculture industry and how to make it easier for farmers and companies to do things that are both profitable and environmentally friendly.

“I always thought our food was grown for just taste and nutrition but yield is most important” in terms of economic incentives, she said. “I want people to do the best for the environment because it’s to the benefit of everyone.”

With her retirement date set for May 1, 2021, LaMountain is exploring careers in ecological economics, building eco-friendly housing, and environmental policymaking but said documenting nature would be at the top of her list.

“My perfect job would be to work for an organization like National Geographic taking beautiful and inspiring photos while informing and educating about the natural world,” LaMountain said but added that she’s not in a rush to start a new career.

“I’m willing to take the time to find the company or government [position] that’s in line with my passions,” she added.

As for SkillBridge and the agriculture program, LaMountain wants to see more transitioning servicemembers take advantage of the benefits that both have to offer.

“I hope more people learn about the benefits of SkillBridge and the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program and that the opportunities become readily available and more well-known,” she said. ●

***“Nothing appealed to me like Florida. Retiring here was a no-brainer.”***





# ARMY VETERAN SAMANTHA BASFORD RELOCATES TO FLORIDA, JOINS NEXT GENERATION OF AGRICULTURE LEADERS

Oct. 2021

Former U.S. Army Specialist Samantha Basford needed a fresh start and returned to Florida to enroll in the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program to join the next generation of agriculture leaders and find solutions to some of the industry's toughest challenges.

Raised in a military family, Basford joined the Army out of Florida at 17-years-old and served for four years stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, which included a tour in Afghanistan as a combat medic before transitioning out of the military to focus on school.

While studying social work at the University of Memphis and searching for a proactive approach to helping people, Basford first contemplated a future in agriculture after learning about Memphis' "food desert," which the United States Department of Agriculture defines as urban or rural areas "with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities."

"I've seen different parts of the country and realized it's a very common problem to not have access to healthy food or to be dependent on fast food or convenience stores," Basford said. "It definitely threw up a red flag for me, and I started looking for ways to link social work to agriculture since I saw it as an area that could use a lot of improvement."

Without any prior agriculture training and a "green thumb that isn't so green," Basford said she "needed some type of education and hands-on experience" and began exploring veteran programs that could open doors for her in the industry.

Through a Google search, she found an article detailing the benefits of the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program — a six-month paid fellowship offering veterans the opportunity to gain first-hand agriculture experience and work alongside researchers at the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS).

Living in Michigan at the time, our Veterans Employment and Training Services (VETS) team walked her through the process, and after getting accepted into the program, Basford relocated to Sarasota to start her fellowship on September 3 at the UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Wimauma.

"The program was everything that I was looking for, and this opportunity couldn't have come at a better time," Basford said, recalling how she favored getting out in the field rather than study agriculture in a classroom from a distance over several years. "Instead of taking a few steps back, the program gave me a head start and got me right in the middle of where I wanted — and fast at that."





***“Instead of taking a few steps back, the program gave me a head start and got me right in the middle of where I wanted — and fast at that.”***

Basford joined the farm team on her first rotation and learned how to operate a tractor with a roller attached to the back, which is used to flatten land after it's been tilled to make planting seeds, controlling weeds, and harvesting crops much easier.

She recently started horticulture, the practice of garden cultivation and management, where she's currently working on a project that involves collecting samples of potatoes and tomatoes to test different levels of fertilizer and phosphorus.

In the coming months, Basford will study plant pathology to determine how pathogens and environmental conditions cause diseases in plants and wants to learn about fighting invasive species of plants in weed science and growing strawberries in her last open rotations.

One of Basford's biggest takeaways from her time in the program is how the experience gave her a new perspective on how much work goes into running a farm, ensuring crops make it to harvest, and getting fruits and vegetables into a store or market.

“Growing up as a military brat, I moved around a lot and never really questioned where my food comes from or how it gets on my plate,” she said. “I only thought harvest time involved a lot of labor, but it's a

year-round job. You're always juggling a new crop.”

Simon Bollin, Agribusiness Development Manager for the Hillsborough County Economic Development, helped develop the framework for the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program in 2018 to ensure veterans received a wide range of skills to be competitive in any position within the agriculture industry. Offering veterans the opportunity to gain agriculture experience in areas such as sales, logistics, research, and technology is what Bollin believes sets Florida apart from other states.

“I looked at other veteran agriculture programs around the country and their main goal was to get veterans into the production side of agriculture, which is great, but if a veteran has no land or equipment, they're at a significant disadvantage,” Bollin said. “The Agriculture Program was designed to give veterans a well-rounded experience in agriculture and provide them the resources and opportunities to be more successful in the industry.”

Alongside her training in the fellowship, Basford is growing her professional network with past program participants currently working at UF/IFAS, allowing her to acquire additional resources and connect with like-minded people. Veterans Florida will assist



Basford with career matching or help start a business through the Entrepreneurship Program once she completes her fellowship in mid-March.

Basford said she believes improving different aspects of agriculture starts at the local level and wants to explore community gardening and urban farming in the short term before applying a holistic approach to a large-scale operation.

“My long-term goal would be to have my own homestead that I use for educating the community on where their food comes from and how to grow their own,” Basford said, adding that her permaculture farm will give people a chance to “enjoy a slice of nature.”

And for veterans considering a future in agriculture, Basford strongly recommends the program and thanked the Veterans Florida team for helping her through every step of the process while ensuring she never had too much on her plate.

“Don’t let fear of change or the unknown stop you from trying something new,” she said. “From the time I talked to Kolby and Amy to the interview, [Veterans Florida] has answered all of my questions about the Agriculture Program and was more than willing to meet my timeline.”

Basford added: “It shows that you guys are not just about filling a slot; it’s about getting the veteran to where they want to go, helping them transition, and finding a new career path.” ●



***“The program was everything that I was looking for, and this opportunity couldn’t have come at a better time.”***



## SARA FERRERA TAPS INTO VETERANS FLORIDA PROGRAMS TO LAUNCH URBAN FARM

*Dec. 2020*

U.S. Army veteran Sara Ferrera’s love of the outdoors and getting her hands dirty stems from her upbringing in Arkansas. While spending much of her childhood exploring nature, she remembers how a nearby farm initially piqued her interest in agriculture.

“I always enjoyed watching farmers work the Earth to feed families,” Ferrera recalled. “I felt a connection to it.”

Ferrera enlisted in the Army in 2011 and served as an intelligence analyst at Fort Riley, Kansas, before transitioning to the Reserves and moving to Florida in 2015 where she continued analysis work as a contractor. Growing tired of the day-to-day grind of the office environment, Ferrera discovered a new



*“My experience has been both fulfilling and eye-opening. Before the internship, I did not know about nematodes, pathology, or the importance of weeds as I do now — I didn’t even know how to operate a tractor.”*



career path when she learned about the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program one night while watching the evening news.

“Fox 13 Tampa Bay had a segment about the agriculture program around Veteran’s Day last year,” she said. “My husband and I saw it and knew it was right up my alley.”

In partnership with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS), our agriculture program is a six-month paid fellowship designed to equip veterans with the knowledge and hands-on experience they need to thrive in Florida’s agriculture industry.

In January 2020 she started working at the UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center (GCREC) in Wimauma to study a wide range of subjects within agriculture.

Beginning with weed science and its impact on crops, over the next few months, Ferrera learned how to identify nematodes and what signs to look for when determining whether a crop is infected with a disease. Following her graduation from the program in July, the veteran joined the GCREC Farm Crew and acquired additional skills, including how to operate farm machinery.

“My experience has been both fulfilling and eye-opening,” Ferrera said. “Before the internship, I did not know about nematodes, pathology, or the importance of weeds as I do now — I didn’t even know how to operate a tractor.”

Without the resources to purchase a large property, Ferrera turned to urban farming; a technique that encompasses growing and producing as much as possible within a small space, typically in a city or suburb.

Ferrera took their advice and founded Floaty’s Farm on about a half-acre in Brandon, FL earlier in Fall 2020. With a focus primarily on microgreens, like arugula, spinach, and kale, she has an ever-growing list of crops on offer and has even begun raising chickens.

“My urban farm concentrates on microgreens,

with a few secondary options, including squash, sweet peas, tomatoes, and I am currently growing guava and papaya trees,” she said, adding: “I have five Barred Rock chickens, who have become family pets. We plan on using them to provide natural fertilizer and fresh eggs.”

As demand increased and the business grew, Ferrera enrolled in the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program through Tampa Bay-based JULO Strategy. With their guidance, she’s developed a concrete financial strategy, hired an assistant to handle administrative tasks, and found new ways to grow and run her agribusiness more efficiently.

“I was overwhelmed just by the thought of being a business owner and only considered it being a one-person show,” said Ferrera, who recently completed the first stage of the CEO Mindset course and has begun the second, added the program “helped me see there can be more than just my backyard.”

In the near term, Ferrera said she would soon like to build a functioning hydroponics system to grow more produce in smaller areas. For the long haul, the veteran has more ambitious plans.

“My long-term goal is to have a 500-acre operation, splitting it between livestock and produce production,” she said. “The farm will function as a non-profit to help veterans as the program has helped me.”

For veterans interested in following in her footsteps and pursuing agriculture, Ferrera highly recommends reaching out to Amy Entress, the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program Manager.

“Contact Amy. She is a go-getter and will point you in the right direction before, during, and after the internship,” she said.

Poised to reap the benefits of following her passion, Ferrera said the most valuable part of her Veterans Florida experience is knowing every aspect of the entire process will lead to a lifelong endeavor.

“Everything I have learned has its place and value,” she said. “I want to take it into my future in the agriculture industry.” ●

# FLORIDA POWERS VETERAN RYAN MCKIBBEN'S PASSION FOR FARMING, BEEKEEPING

Dec. 2020



As Ryan McKibben prepares his crops and pollinator habitat for the coming winter, the former U.S. Army sergeant remembers the difficulty of transitioning back to civilian life after 10 years of military service and two combat tours in Iraq.

“I had struggled for years thinking that I had made a huge mistake leaving the Army,” he recounted. “I always felt like I was at least a decade behind my peers in my career goals.”

McKibben initially sought a career in information technology (IT) and later worked at a Tallahassee law firm while earning his bachelor's degree at Florida State University. However, he soon realized the 9-to-5 office environment was not for him.

He then came across a Facebook ad in 2018 for the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program — our partnership with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) that offers veterans hands-on experience and helps them transition into careers in Florida's \$149 billion agriculture industry.

Having experience with his own backyard garden and wanting to learn more about professional growing practices in hopes of one day running a full-scale farming operation, McKibben entered the agriculture program to pursue his budding passion.

As part of his paid fellowship at the UF/IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center in Quincy (NFREC), McKibben spent six months learning about the many facets of agriculture by working full-time alongside the program's farm technicians.

“I was able to spend lots of time with the faculty at the NFREC, who took the time to put our hard work into perspective by explaining the experiments we were conducting and how it affects the industry,” he said.

From planting and harvesting crops such as oranges, peaches, tomatoes, broccoli, and tung trees to caring for and maintaining tractors and supply lines, McKibben received training that laid the foundation for owning his farm.

“The program gave me the opportunity to get a hands-on education while being able to support my family financially,” he said. “It's the reason I am able to be a farmer and be a part of such a wonderful and







*“Farming is meaningful, purpose-driven work. I honestly feel like I am serving my fellow man again. Veterans and farming are a natural fit. There’s machinery to maintain and tight deadlines to meet and the end result is a huge payoff with a sense of purpose and pride.”*

fulfilling industry.”

While working at the UF/IFAS, McKibben received the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ (FDACS) May 2019 Veteran of the Month award from Commissioner Nikki Fried for his service, community leadership, and passion for Florida agriculture.

Today, the now 38-year-old veteran owns and operates McKibben Farms with eight acres in two cities and combines his love of farming with beekeeping — a practice McKibben began after his wife’s grandfather invited him to harvest honey.

In his hometown of Tallahassee, the focus is on three of the four McKibben Honey apiaries, chickens to produce eggs, and a garden to feed his family. Next year he’ll grow beans, corn, watermelons, and tomatoes in Monticello along with the clover and wildflowers already planted for his roughly 100,000 bees.

McKibben said he’ll continue nursing his nearly 30 citrus trees over the next couple of years and wants to add blueberries and blackberries to his crop rotation soon. Plans also include shifting toward organic farming and moving his agribusiness away from using artificial agents.

“I am transitioning to a sustainable agriculture model where there will be almost no need for chemical fertilizers or pesticides,” he said. “This will include chickens raised on the pasture, organic vegetables, and livestock grazing in between the fruit trees and bushes.”

Outside of managing his farms and apiaries,

McKibben said his experience with Veterans Florida was vital to landing a position as an energy policy analyst at FDACS, where he focuses on water, solar, and carbon policies that not only protect the environment but also help farmers.

Even though he struggled early on during the transition back to civilian life, McKibben has never been more confident in his future agricultural pursuits, and the support of those around him serves as a constant reminder of just how far he’s come.

“I’m in a job I always wanted and am farming as much as I can,” he said. “I get feedback from my friends all the time about how they wish they could be doing the things I do.”

McKibben also has some advice for veterans interested in starting a career in agriculture but might be sitting on the fence: “Do it. Farming is meaningful, purpose-driven work. I honestly feel like I am serving my fellow man again.[a] Veterans and farming are a natural fit. There’s machinery to maintain and tight deadlines to meet and the end result is a huge payoff with a sense of purpose and pride.”

To put veterans on the path toward success, McKibben strongly recommends enrolling in the Veterans Florida Agriculture Program because the training and resources it provided allowed him to jumpstart his agricultural pursuits and he’s confident it will do the same for aspiring veteran farmers.

“I would do it all over again if I could,” he said. “I hope the agriculture program continues for many, many years and that each veteran farmer it produces goes on to do better and better things.” ●



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