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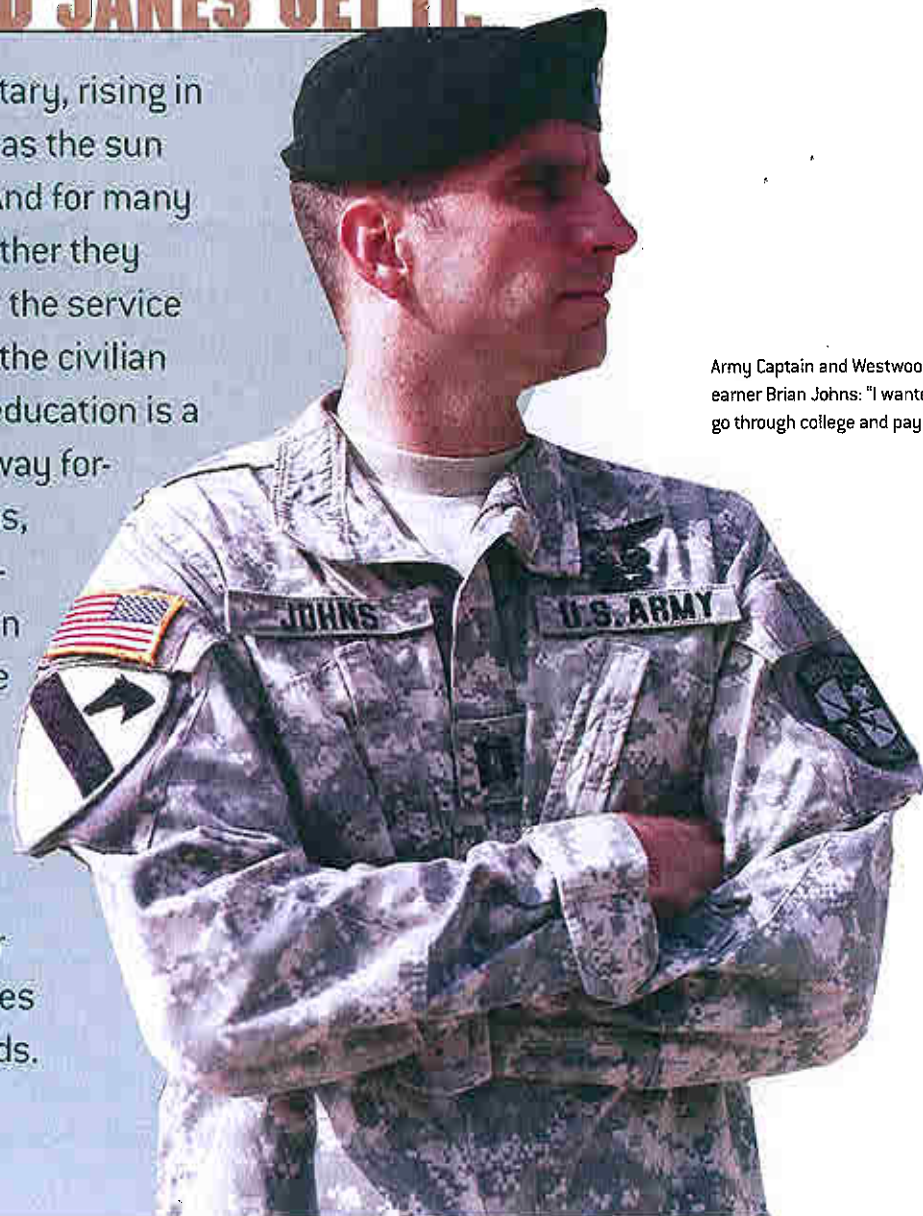
**Katrina Offers Lessons Beyond
Lens to Photography Students**

Former Marine and 9/11
Hero Michael Vera
Answers Call to New Career

Soldiers and Sailors in the Classroom

GI JOES AND JANES GET IT.

To members of the military, rising in the ranks is as natural as the sun rising in the morning. And for many service members, whether they are building a career in the service or planning a future in the civilian workforce, getting an education is a critical stop along the way forward. How that happens, however, can be as varied as the institutions in higher education. Some schools are very well equipped to support this population of active duty personnel and veterans; other colleges and universities are marching backwards.



Army Captain and Westwood College degree earner Brian Johns: "I wanted to be the first to go through college and pay my own way."

Luckily, many colleges in the career education sector are well suited to helping military men and women move ahead. That is as it should be. According to Randy Plunkett, National Director of Military Affairs at DeVry, Inc., 4.8 million of the seven million people utilizing GI Bill benefits since World War II have used the funds for vocational education and training or to start a business.

These can be young people who enter the military right out of high school. People like Brian Johns, Victoria Gugino or Michael Vera. Johns, a recently retired U.S. Army Captain, enlisted the day after high school graduation and spent four years in Germany.

Although his father owned his own business, Johns did not want to take what might have been the easier path to school. "I didn't want my Dad to pay for my college...I wanted to be the first to go through college and pay my own way," Johns said. He ultimately attended Northeast Louisiana University (now the University of Louisiana Monroe). While there, however, he says he had an epiphany. "I am working for my Dad, and I am not interested in what I am doing. I could make a lot of money but I missed the challenge of the military." He signed up for ROTC and, upon graduation, returned to the Army as an officer.

Victoria Gugino, 23, a former Navy corpsman, waited an entire eight days to enlist after graduating high school, celebrating her 18th birthday in boot camp. "I just didn't think I was ready for college yet," Gugino recalls. "My grandfather was in the Navy. My great grandfather was in the Navy. My stepsister is in the Navy. My cousin now attends the Naval Academy. So it was just something I wanted to do." Gugino spent the next five years in active duty, stationed at the Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland and the Naval Branch Health Clinic in La Maddelena, Italy.

Michael Vera joined the Marine Corps at age 17. The Jersey City, New Jersey native says college just wasn't for him at that point. "I was decent in high school. I just didn't have the focus. I knew that doing the traditional college wasn't the right time for me to do. I thought I needed a good kick in the butt to get myself straight...to mature and to learn some type of responsibility."

Roundabout Route

Others take a more roundabout route into the military. U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Lenora Cook, for instance, 53, joined the service in her mid thirties, following a career progression that already included degrees as a licensed practical nurse, registered nurse, a graduate degree in nursing service management, and a stint with Polyclinic Medical Center, a major hospital system in Harrisburg, Penn., as director of critical care nursing. For Cook, working 12 to 14 hour days in the hospital system, the opportunity to join the Air Force and pick up a first duty assignment in Crete seemed too good a life changing experience to pass up.

"I was decent in high school. I just didn't have the focus. I knew that doing the traditional college wasn't the right time for me to do. I thought I needed a good kick in the butt to get myself straight...to mature and to learn some type of responsibility."

-Marine Corps Veteran Michael Vera

"Typically, new nurses going into the military don't go overseas in their first assignment," Cook said. "But because I had critical care background and a master's degree, they worked with me....I like travel and it sounded like a fun thing to do. I never had any intention of staying." That was 18 years ago. Cook ultimately became a flight nurse and chief nurse in the expeditionary medical group at Tallil Air Base, Iraq. Later, she became an airlift planner, responsible for medical evacuations of wounded and sick military personnel and military working dogs, and placing herself in harm's way on several of those missions.

Coming under fire herself and air evacuating wounded service members, Cook once again found herself working 12 to 14 hour days. She also started looking for coping mechanisms to deal with the stress of life in and around a war zone. Cook found that mental release in academics generally and an online doctoral program at Argosy University specifically.

"We all have different ways that we deal with stress," Cook says. "Some people would come back from the flight and not be able to sleep. Or would go run for a long period of time. In the location I was in you could have three drinks a night. I am not much of a drinker, so that did not work for me...If I can get into a book, it's like a mental reprieve. If I can read something, and I can research it, I know that I have a deadline and I know that I need to get something in, then

it is just a coping mechanism that works for me...It really forced me to get my mind off the war.”

Duty Calls; Online Education Responds

During her time abroad, Cook fulfilled the course requirements for her EDD in organizational leadership. The flight nurse says that although she may have been the only service member around pursuing a doctoral degree, several fellow service members were likewise involved in using their downtime in the war zone for additional education.

Those would be people like Caryn Andrews, a second class petty officer in the Navy Reserves, stationed at Camp Buehring in Kuwait. Andrews spends much of her time working in personal security details, including providing the security for visiting celebrities like Robin Williams, Jessica Simpson and Kid Rock. Andrews graduated high school in Hoffman Estates, Ill., and joined the Navy Reserves at age 22. She was already working

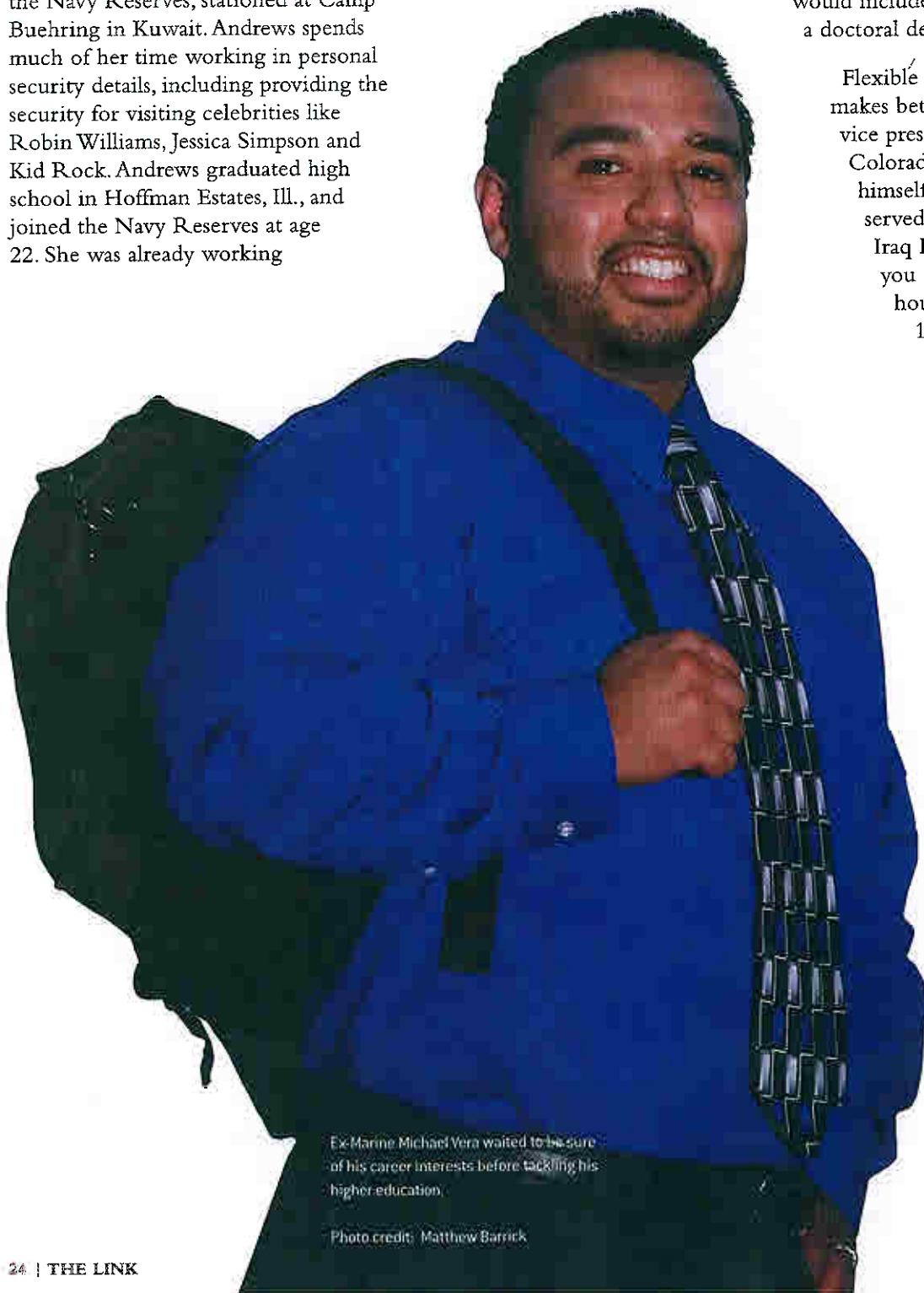
toward an undergraduate degree in psychology at Argosy University when she received word that she was being deployed overseas:

“I was already enrolled in my summer session classes and had to postpone those classes due to being in training during the summer semester. I was not sure if I was going to be able to complete my degree because at the time Argosy had a restriction on the amount of classes that could be taken online versus in the classroom.”

Argosy lifted the restriction, allowing Andrews to not only graduate on time but also to participate in a graduation ceremony that would include her mother, who is receiving a doctoral degree in education.

Flexible use of online education just makes better sense to Jim Hendrickson, vice president of military education at Colorado Technical University and himself a combat veteran with time served in Panama, Bosnia, Iraq I and Iraq II. “Even on a busy day when you are deployed and working 12 hours, that leaves you another 12 hours...in my experience, being deployed, you can only watch *Batman* so many times. It is a big help to have something else to put your mind on—to put some brain power on a different direction than your current situation.”

Brian Johns eventually went to aviation school, learned to fly Apache helicopters, and six months after the September 11 attacks, was deployed to Iraq. Johns spent 16 months there as an aviation operations officer, living in the Green Zone. While there, he said, U.S. personnel were mortared every single day. Johns helped set up the Green Zone aircraft landing zone and coordinated



Ex-Marine Michael Vera waited to be sure of his career interests before tackling his higher education.

Photo credit: Matthew Barrick

Surgical tech student Victoria Gugino says that after reviewing her military transcript, Southwest Florida College gave her credit for “my hands on experience and what I did every day for five years.”

air flights for Congressional delegations, cabinet secretaries and other VIPs.

Unlike Cook, Johns waited until his return to the states in June, 2004 to seek his MBA from Westwood College.

The Army captain turned to online education while serving as an educator himself, heading up the ROTC program at the University of California at Los Angeles, Northridge campus. At that time, Johns found himself at a fork in the road. “A lot of Army officers, once they become captains, have to earn a master’s degree if they want to keep progressing in the ranks... That’s one reason I did it. Promotion and to better myself,” Johns said. He was also considering the possibility of standing down from the military, using the advanced degree to help start a new business.

No longer under enemy fire, Johns found that stress was still a factor in his life, ramping up his ROTC program from six to 40 students, meeting the obligations of family life, staying in shape to meet military requirements. Yet he wanted the degree. The convenience of online education loomed large in his thinking: “I didn’t have the time to go to a brick and mortar institution. I was very, very busy... So I figured I have to work on this on my own time. I had late nights and weekends.”

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Victoria Gugino, a former Navy corpsman, celebrated her 18th birthday in boot camp. "My grandfather was in the Navy. My great grandfather was in the Navy. My stepsister is in the Navy, so it was just something I wanted to do," she says.

Photo credit: Brian Tietz

Getting Clued into Military Friendly

Many institutions offer online courses. Not all institutions can be termed “military friendly.” It’s almost a matter of nature and nurture. Some institutions are naturally good at working with military personnel and veterans; others, it’s at best a work in progress. According to DeVry’s Randy Plunkett, even prestigious universities often have “no clue” how to help service personnel reintegrate into higher education. He maintains that everyone across higher education is looking at the issue of how to become veteran friendly and they need to dust off and revisit their Vietnam era policies.

“We work in a crowded market and a highly competitive market. [Veterans] are the most savvy customer we’ve got. They do their homework. They pick out programs and institutions based on many, many hours of meticulous research. The worst thing we can do is, when they select our institution, to not have policies that are conducive to their situation,” Plunkett says.

As a practical matter, however, creating a veteran friendly environment may be harder than it sounds, particularly if a college class is composed of younger students with no military background or a faculty member with no interest in understanding the special issues of military personnel or service veterans. Part of the problem could simply be a slightly older service member trying to relate to a room full of 18 year olds. Part could be an instructor turning a deaf ear to the experiences of the service member or doing little or nothing to help that individual feel welcome in the civilian setting. Some institutions may have no additional resources for helping those who have been in combat cope with the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, concentration problems, or special tutoring needs.

Plunkett says DeVry is creating veterans clubs in 23 major metropolitan areas it serves, run by veterans, “to help veterans acclimate, not only to school but to society and perhaps their job...the most important thing is peer contact. That is why I encourage every career college to have a dedicated veterans club. Someplace where they can have a resource center. A place where peers can talk with peers about their experiences...Camaraderie really helps people understand, ‘I am not the only one here going through this.’ I think the biggest cry I hear from veterans [is] they feel isolated and alone.”



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Colorado Technical University has established a Wounded Warrior program, pairing wounded students who have been pursuing degrees for some time with wounded students just starting out. The university has also revisited some of its service member policies, with a particular eye to not penalizing those caught between their duty to country and their responsibilities as students. Hendrickson says the university puts military duty first, with flexible start and stop accommodations should a deployment conflict with a class schedule.

Flexibility, understanding and a willingness to just be a sympathetic voice on the phone, even a voice from far away, helped Lenora Cook get through the Argosy program. Referring to the critical role played by her program head, Dr. Celia Edmundson in Sarasota, Fla., Cook said a series of phone conversations and email exchanges at 3 a.m. Baghdad time helped her stay grounded in her academic pursuits, particularly when times got tough. "You have to go and fly this mission or you have had a horrible thing happen. You have mass casualties to get moved. There is no way that you can get to a paper. There is no way you can make yourself absorb it. There would be times when I would send her an email or talk on the phone... She really stands out as the person who helped me get through this."

Gaining Perspective, Switching Gears

No one's road to higher education may be more notable and dramatic than that of Michael Vera, the 17-year-old marine who deferred college, looking for the opportunity to grow up. His service as an administrative support specialist led him to duty at the Pentagon in 2000. Stationed there on the morning of September 11, 2001, he was busy preparing a secure meeting room for his superiors when his wife called with the news that an airliner had crashed into the World Trade Center.

Discussing the situation with a fellow lance corporal, Vera said that "After the second plane hit [the World Trade Center], we pretty much knew it was intended and it was not an accident. We started discussing how much damage it would cause if a plane actually hit the Pentagon."

About five minutes later, it did. Although the Boeing 757 struck nearby, the double padded, concrete and steel walls of the secure meeting room may have saved Vera's life. He was knocked temporarily unconscious, but was barricaded and ultimately protected from fire and debris by falling bookcases in his area. He and his buddy not only survived the explosion and inferno, the pair spent the rest of the day helping 25 other victims escape from the impact area. (The Imagine

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America Foundation, the sector's leading charitable organization and an affiliate of the Career College Association, recently recognized Vera's heroism with its 2008 LDRSHIP Award—a \$5,000 scholarship.)

Perhaps this is the type of experience that ultimately puts life into sharper perspective and into a higher gear. Vera went on to support not one but two Marine Corps Commandants, ending his military career as a sergeant in 2007. Vera went to work at the State Department, still unclear about his future plans. "I didn't want to go to school and just take courses just to take them. I wanted to be focused on what I really wanted to study," Vera says. He found that focus by working with engineers at State. "Looking at the things they did on a daily basis and the projects that they worked on motivated me. It gave me the drive to go to school." Attending DeVry in Arlington, Va., Vera is pursuing a degree in electronic engineering and plans a career as a security engineering officer.

Cutting to the Chase

That desire to "cut to the chase" in career terms seems fairly common among service members. Particularly if that means education and training that builds on skills learned in the military and delivered with a hands-on, real-world spin.

Michael Vera admits that he gets bored easily and needs a hands-on approach to education. Victoria Gugino, a surgical technician and medical assisting student at Southwest Florida College in Fort Myers, says she values her academic experience because, after reviewing her military transcript, the school gave her credit for "my hands on experience and what I did every day for five years."

"Military students are a little bit different than a student straight out of high school," says Colorado Technical University's Jim Hendrickson. "They have been out and about. They have seen the world. They have a little time to mature and get some idea of what it is they are looking for in a career. They have actually had a career so a career college for this population is terrific."

For Lenora Cook, the decision about future career directions remains in the future, to be determined in part by a promotion board this fall. She could be moved up to full Colonel. Or she could bring her Air Force "lark" to an end after 20 years. Either way, earning her doctorate while in the service will advance her career options.

Cook might even reinvent herself as an instructor. "I would say that I am very good in front of a classroom. I

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Lt. Col. Lenora Cook, a flight nurse and chief nurse in the expeditionary medical group at Jalil Air Base, Iraq, used her online studies at Argosy University to take her mind off the stresses of war.

Photo credit: Amanda Lopez

like public speaking, and I like having students and working with them. I want to teach and I think having the background of a PhD and research... would really give me a good foundation to do that," Cook says.

The Mission Continues

Career reinvention is also on the mind of Edwin RamosRey, age 46, former first sergeant in the U.S. Army with 26 years in the military and a record that includes combat in Iraq I and II. RamosRey is studying at Heritage College in Jacksonville, Fla., to become a pharmacy technician. He says the nine-month program and small class sizes are similar to the short courses offered in the Army:

"It works out almost perfectly because in the military I was used to the small group type of structure... With the smaller classes like here at Heritage, you get an opportunity to have more one on one time with the teacher. You are not just one more face in the crowd."

Far from being intimidated by the math and science encountered in his new career, RamosRey says his service as a cavalry scout involved plenty of calculations for calling in directed fire.

RamosRey, also an Imagine America Foundation LDRSHIP Award winner, is fired up about his new career, however. "I am sort of reinventing myself. This is something I look at as kind of the same as a mission. I am on a mission. I have my long term goals and my short term goals. I have a mission statement. I am going to take this as far as I can go."

Disciplined to compete with his younger classmates and fascinated by jawbreaker topics like pharmacokinetics, RamosRey hopes to attend pharmacy school and to become a pharmacist by the time he is 53.

The former Army scout's gung-ho attitude seems representative of the active duty service men and women and veterans in career education.

"We got a call from a student who finished his first session, got great grades, and he called to say, 'hey, I am going to have to delay starting the second session because I am having my leg amputated tomorrow. So I need a little time to recuperate from that

and then I want to get going again,'" says Jim Hendrickson, adding that the student apologized for causing trouble and indicating he would be back in five and a half weeks, after learning to use his artificial leg.

"You can't say enough about someone like that," Hendrickson concluded.

Bob Cohen is editor of *The Link*.



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