Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities
Instruction, Inspiration – and a Path to Business Ownership

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After winning the coveted mirror ball trophy in 2011 as champion of Season 13 of Dancing with the Stars, J.R. Martinez became the face of veterans returning from combat with disabilities. But just a few years earlier, his rise to fame was anything but a sure thing. Martinez credits his participation in a program called Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities for putting him on the path to success. “It did wonders for me,” Martinez says.

Featuring in a 2013 60 Minutes segment titled “Succeeding as Civilians,” Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities (EBV) is a yearlong program available for free to post-9/11 veterans with service-related disabilities who have a desire to start a business. The program is offered through a consortium of eight universities: Syracuse University, University of California, Los Angeles, Florida State University, Texas A&M, Purdue, University of Connecticut, Louisiana State University and Cornell. It is funded entirely through private donations, and all instructors donate their time.

Opportunity Knocks

Martinez’s story began in 2003. Less than a month after being deployed to Iraq, his Humvee hit a roadside bomb and he nearly lost his life. It took him 34 months and 33 surgeries to recover from the burns that covered 34 percent of his body. While still at the hospital, he began to share his story with others who were dealing with combat-related injuries. The hope he was able to offer his brothers and sisters in arms gave him a plan for his future: to become a motivational speaker and share his experiences of triumphing over adversity.

But how do you take an idea and turn it into a business?

Back home in Georgia in 2008, Martinez, now medically discharged from the Army, was struggling to get his motivational speaking career off the ground. “I was completely confused,” he says. “I was 24 years old and I was having a really difficult time understanding how to market myself, how to package myself, how to convince schools and businesses to allow me to come into their facility and speak.”

One day he got a call from Dr. Randy Blass at Florida State University. Blass was about to launch FSU’s first EBV class and needed a speaker. “I explained the concept to J.R.,” Blass says. After hearing about the program, Martinez told him he didn’t want to just speak. He wanted to enroll in EBV himself.

Blass’s friend Dr. Mike Haynie founded EBV at Syracuse University in 2007. Haynie’s last active duty assignment was as an instructor at the Air Force Academy, where he met Blass, also an instructor at the Academy. Less than a week after being discharged, Haynie came to Syracuse as a professor of entrepreneurship.

“In [Haynie’s] research, he kept coming across prior military service as a strong indicator for not only likelihood to start a business, but likelihood to succeed in that business,” says Jared Lyon, EBV’s national program manager. Haynie also found that people with disabilities have a strong propensity to become successful entrepreneurs. “If you combine those two subsets - veterans with service-connected disabilities - you’ve got a group by statistics alone that are more likely than their civilian counterparts to start businesses and succeed in those businesses,” Lyon says.

EBV graduates have lived up to Dr. Haynie’s research predictions. More than 800 veterans have now graduated from the program. To date, 70 percent have started businesses, and 92 percent are still in business. Participants come from all 50 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands and Germany.

Finding Common Ground

The program is divided into three phases. Each class of 20-25 veterans begins by taking a month-long online course. Classes may be made up of individuals whose backgrounds and education levels are extremely varied, and the online component serves to get everyone on the same page.

Phase 2 is the heart of the program, the nine-day, in-person bootcamp at one of the eight sponsoring universities. Relating his experience at FSU, Martinez says, “It made me realize I wasn’t alone. I wasn’t the only one who was confused and frustrated.” Describing his week, he says, “It’s a literally crash course. You’re getting all four years of business school crammed into a few days.”

The last phase of the program is 12 months of ongoing support that connects prospective entrepreneurs with industry-related mentors, helping them continue to shape and solidify their business concepts and identify and overcome barriers to entry. During this phase, EBV also provides pro-bono business services including logo design, website design and hosting, tax, legal and accounting services.

The application process for entry into the program is rigorous and competitive: 25 percent of applicants are accepted. “Prior education is not a deciding factor,” Lyon says. “It’s that fire in the belly for entrepreneurship, that desire, come Hell or high water, whether or not I’m accepted into EBV, I’m going to start a business.”

EBV empowers veterans with disabilities to take control of their lives through business ownership. It also helps other veterans by providing employment opportunities. “The cool thing about this program is that you get a vet who opens up a business, that vet understands how the military community works, and now they hire another vet,” Martinez says. “You help close the gap of that unemployment ratio that exists among the military that is very high.”

Is entrepreneurship for you? For further information about EBV and how to apply, visit vets.syr.edu/ebv.