

Helping Veterans Make the Leap From Uniform to Classroom

BY SHAUN ILLINGWORTH RC '01 SCILS '04

As a combat correspondent and cameraman in Afghanistan with the US Marine Corps, John Rafoss documented the exploits of Coalition forces in Helmand Province, which he describes as one of the most dangerous places on earth. Following his discharge in June 2009, Rafoss once again had to

adjust to an alien environment as he entered Rutgers' School of Arts and Sciences (SAS) and began rubbing elbows with students whose ages and values were often much different than his.

Enter the Volunteer Veterans Mentorship Program, launched last spring by the Rutgers University College Community, the school's adult education unit, to ease the often difficult transition from military to academic life for returning war veterans. Since then, exceptional progress has been made as the program has enrolled approximately 400 mentees, including veterans and their dependents, surviving dependents, students on active duty and those with National Guard and Reserve commitments. What they're linked to is a highly dedicated and motivated network of some 200 mentors drawn from the ranks of Rutgers alumni, faculty, staff and friends.

Rafoss, for his part, was paired with a mentor who served in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. They now speak

every Sunday, and the discussions have graduated from course advice and career tips to helping Rafoss through trying times.

"He checks up on me to make sure everything is going well in both my school work and my personal life," says the appreciative veteran, now studying political science and international relations.



Children swarm the camera during a patrol in Deh Rawod, Afghanistan, November, 2008.

PHOTO BY US MARINE CORPS CPL. JOHN SCOTT RAFOSS



Cpl. John Rafoss, Christmas morning in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

PHOTO TAKEN BY BRITISH ARMY SGT. JIM ELMER.



★★★★★ BOOT CAMP ★★★★★

FOR MENTORS

Alumni Answer the Call

Rafoss is hardly alone. Hundreds of veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan and other flashpoints around the world have been streaming into Rutgers for several years. Now, with the Post-9/11 GI Bill in place (as of August 2009), university officials are bracing for what could become a torrent of students fresh out of the military.

The Volunteer Veterans Mentoring Program stands ready to help, thanks to alumni like **Ando Merendi ENG '62**, who have proudly answered the call. A US Army veteran who served in Vietnam and Germany, Merendi was part of the Scarlet Rifles as an undergraduate, and is currently a member of the Queens Guard Alumni Association (a constituent group of the Rutgers Alumni Association). QGAA has encouraged its members—many who have military backgrounds—to become actively involved in the mentoring program.



Not just veteran-students, but their mentors enjoy a strong support network under the Volunteer Veterans Mentorship Program.

Workshops on all three Rutgers campuses train mentors on how to act as a bridge between veterans and the broad menu of services available to them at the university. They also learn how to effectively reach out to their partners through face-to-face, telephone and e-mail communications. During those exchanges, mentors are taught how to spot the warning signs for a variety of problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic issues and difficulties in the classroom.

A Sakai web site has even been created to meet the needs of mentors who are limited in their ability to travel to the Rutgers's campuses. By logging on to the site, they can download training manuals, learn about upcoming events, and chat with program coordinators and other mentors. Through Sakai, mentors have access to a constantly updated directory of contacts and services, enabling them to refer their mentees to everything from local Veterans Administration representatives to child and health care services on campus.

Thanks to the magic of e-mail and online video chat software like Skype, alumni from across the country have found it possible to become "long distance" mentors. Just ask **Ando Merendi ENG '62**, who communicates with his partner from his home 3,000 miles away in California.

"It's very satisfying to know that I'm helping somebody take the right road so that somewhere down the line they'll be able to rise through the ranks."

NORMAN WEINER
Mentor, Retired President
ShopRite Beverage

"The military is very structured, and a college campus is not," emphasizes Merendi, who experienced the difference firsthand when he attended Indiana

University in between active duty deployments. "It certainly takes some time to adjust."

An environmental engineer with the US Government's General Services Administration (GSA), Merendi is doing his part to ease the process for his mentee, an engineering student who's shown himself eager for career guidance. "He's asked some good questions about what's out there in terms of opportunities and salaries," says Merendi, "and being able to answer those inquiries has been very gratifying for me."

Bill Nigh RC '72 has also dispensed valuable career advice after signing on

for the Volunteer Veterans Mentoring Program. A member of the U.S. Army in the 1970s, Nigh is today a professional technical writer whose company encourages its employees to volunteer. Nigh was quick to respond. "I just want to be there for him regardless of what comes up," he says of the relationship he's forged with his partner. "For the most part, he's been looking for some structure to help him get to the next level of his life."

When Norman Weiner learned of the fledgling program at Rutgers, he saw the perfect opportunity to meld his previous

continued on next page

Vet Mentoring *from page 13*

experience as a mentor with his background as an Army veteran during the Cold War. Weiner graduated from CUNY's Baruch College, but maintains deep ties to Rutgers through the alumni in his family. As retired president of ShopRite Beverage, he brings over 50 years business experience to his mentoring role, imparting it in the form of practical knowledge aimed at helping his mentees in their job hunts, as well as in their critical thinking. "It's very satisfying to know that I'm helping somebody take the right road so that somewhere down the line they'll be able to rise through the ranks," he says.

Rutgers Staff Gets Involved

Alumni are not the only ones giving unselfishly of their time to become mentors. Take Dorothea Berkhout, associate dean at the Edward Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. As the mother of a recently commissioned U.S. Army second lieutenant, she wanted to help students who are not only fulfilling their educational, but military, requirements. Her knowledge of the ins-and-outs of school bureaucracy—she's a 25-year veteran of the Rutgers-New Brunswick campus—have enabled her to point her mentee, an undergraduate at the Bloustein School, in the right direction.

Ninfa Mueller, Associate University Director of Financial Aid, also had her family's rich history of military service in mind when she agreed to become part of the mentoring program. But she brings another valuable asset to the table: her work as a financial aid liaison to Rutgers students enrolled in the National Guard and the Army and Air Force ROTC programs.

Troy Shinbrot, a professor of Biomedical Engineering, summed up his reasons for volunteering: "If we're sending people to be in harm's way, the least we can do



Alumni of The Queens Guard and Scarlet Rifles gather for the team's 50th anniversary reunion in May 2007. Standing l to r: Michael Sternick RC '61, Ando Merendi ENG '62; Seated l to r, William Lyons RC '62, Weston Dow GSNB '61. PHOTO COURTESY OF VERNE JAMES RC '81

is to help them as much as we can when they return." Prof. Shinbrot has offered one of his mentees guidance on his senior design project, the culmination of his undergraduate work in engineering.

Veterans Appreciate the Effort

How are veterans reacting to their newfound partners?

"It's kind of nice to know he's there," says Joseph Geswelli, an SAS junior from Blairstown, NJ, of his mentor, a one-time Marine who served in the Vietnam war. "I now have somebody to talk to about things I can't discuss with most other people because they wouldn't understand."

Geswelli joined the Marines in 2002 and during his five years of active duty served in Afghanistan, Iraq and Peru in military intelligence. "I'd say [the biggest challenge] was just learning how to be a student again after being away from it for so many years," notes Geswelli, who previously earned his associate's degree at Morris County College. "At Rutgers in particular, it was the sheer size of the school and trying to navigate within it."

In the past, veteran-students facing transition problems would often muddle through on their own, notes Betzaida Feliciano-Berrios, assistant dean of Recruitment and Student Services at Rutgers. The Volunteer Veterans Mentor-

ing Program is starting to change that. "In cases where these students are connecting with mentors," she points out, "they're finding they can share their stories and get the kind of answers to questions they really need."

Creating a Model Program

The Volunteer Veterans Mentorship Program has evolved from a pilot initiative in New Brunswick to embrace not just New Brunswick but the Newark and Camden campuses. Indeed, the program's success has prompted other universities to contact Rutgers for assistance in setting up their own mentoring efforts. What's more, it has formed a partnership with Veterans Across America to offer veteran-students corporate mentorship and networking opportunities aimed at securing jobs for them after graduation.

"We're delighted we can serve as a model for other colleges," says Feliciano-Berrios, who oversees the Veterans Mentoring Program. "Most importantly, though, we believe we're showing veterans transitioning to academic life that there's a huge group of Rutgers people out there rooting very hard for them to succeed." 📌

Special thanks to Carl Burns, RC '64, RBSG '73, Joe Carlani RC '84, and SAS sophomore Tana Loy.

To learn more about becoming a mentor or about the various veterans' resources available at Rutgers, visit

<http://veterans.rutgers.edu>