Business Boot Camp

University-led entrepreneurship programs help veterans launch startups

By Robin Roenker

FOLLOWING HIS TRANSITION TO civilian life after an injury in Afghanistan, Army veteran Paul Whitten had settled into a successful career at Amazon — but he dreamed of launching his own business.

In November 2023, he started Nashville Adventures, a themed walking-tour company in Music City, with $3,400 in capital. In less than a year, his venture has generated more than $100,000 in revenue.

Whitten credits his entrepreneurial success to several factors, including a passion for history and a commitment to hiring other veterans to lead his tours. But the main contributor, he says, was his participation in the National Veterans Entrepreneurship Program (VEP) at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC), a free boot-camp experience for veterans with small-business aspirations.

"I would not have started this business without VEP," Whitten says. "I was able to learn about topics that were not even on my radar or that I only had a faint idea about — things like SEO (search engine optimization), marketing and budgeting — and I came away with an effective business plan as well as a source of ongoing mentoring and support."

VEP attendees complete several weeks of online self-study before convening at their selected campus — Oklahoma State University or the University of Florida, in addition to UTC — for five to eight days of intensive entrepreneurship training, all at no out-of-pocket cost to participants. The workshops are typically led by university business professors and successful business owners — including VEP alumni.

To date, VEP has graduated just over 800 participants. Many VEP cohorts stay in touch via social media after their boot camps to celebrate one another's successes as their respective businesses grow.

"The camaraderie that develops over the course of the week is amazing to see," says Sandra Cordell, a Navy veteran who directs UTC's VEP program, which is now in its 13th year.

"(Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans) provided a road map of everything I was missing in my business plan."

– TAMEKA RUSHING, Glass Half Full Solutions

Another program, the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans (EBV), offers a month of directed self-study, in-person entrepreneurial training and concentrated, post-boot camp support at no cost to veteran participants.

Introduced at Syracuse University in 2007, EBV is now offered at nine U.S. universities, two of which — Florida State University and Louisiana State University — offer specialty EBV programs focused on business accelera-

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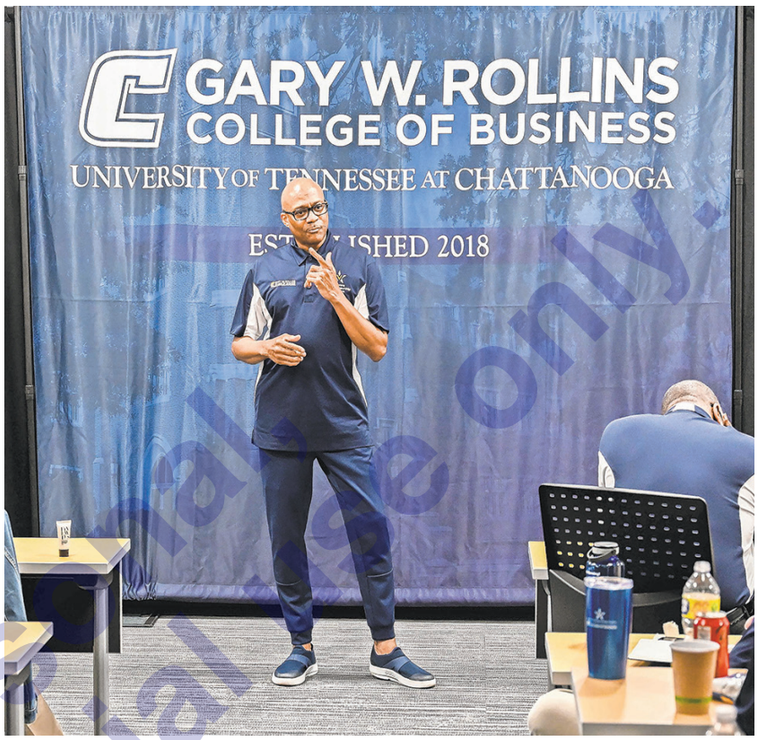

GARY W. ROLLINS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA

Navy veteran and Air Force reservist Michael Scott presents a pitch for his private home health care business during the 2022 Veterans Entrepreneurship Program Boot Camp at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

GARY W. ROLLINS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA

Air Force veteran Kira Givens participates in a speed networking exercise at the 2022 Veterans Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

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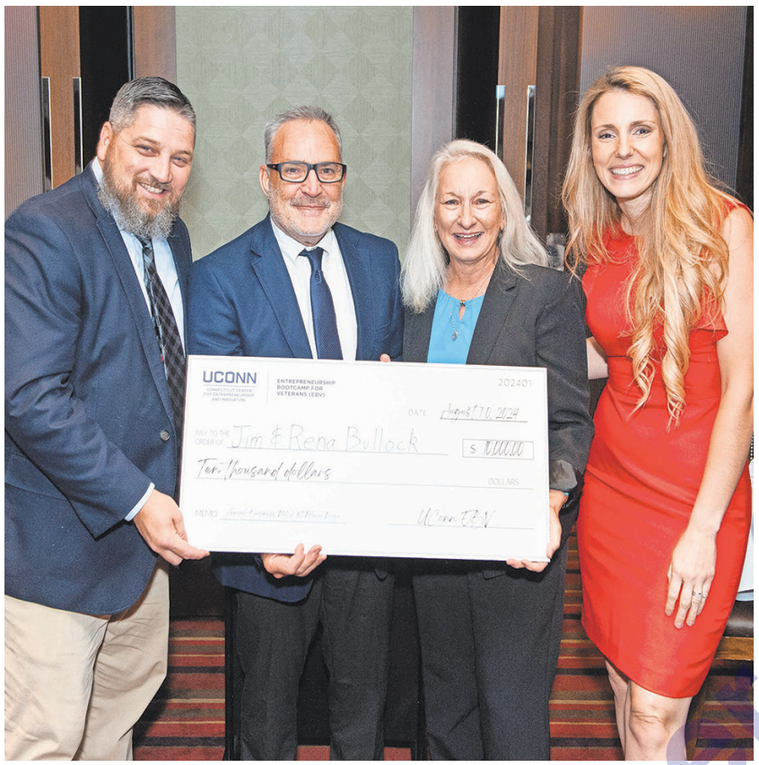

DEFINING STUDIOS

Jim and Rena Bullock, center, won top prize for US Airsoft Targets at the 2024 University of Connecticut Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans.

tion and entrepreneurship for military families. Collectively, EBV has graduated more than 2,400 veteran participants, 79 percent of whom have started or grown their own business since completing the program.

There's a collaborative spirit between EBV and VEP: In fact, some veterans opt to attend both programs over the course of their entrepreneurial development, says Misty Stutsman Fox, who helped launch VEP at Oklahoma State and now serves as director of entrepreneurship and small business at Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families, which hosts EBV and several other veteran-specific entrepreneurship training experiences.

The boot camps at both EBV and VEP end with a judged pitch competition — similar in premise to the TV show *Shark Tank* — with the winning teams securing prizes. At the University of Connecticut's 2024 EBV, Army veteran Jim Bullock and his wife, Rena, took the competition's $10,000 top prize for their pitch to make and market steel airsoft gun targets under the name US Airsoft Targets.

Regardless of the pitch competition outcome, everyone who attends EBV leaves feeling inspired and empowered from the experience, says Nicholas Martinelli, an Army veteran who serves as program manager for the University of Connecticut EBV.

"By the second day of every cohort, it is as if everybody's known each other for months, and the sense of military camaraderie instantly comes right back," Martinelli says. "The participants immediately start working with each other and helping each other navigate through specific business challenges, and it's awesome to see."

Tameka Rushing of Arlington, Texas, an Air Force veteran and owner of managerial training firm Glass Half Full Solutions, agrees.

Through EBV, "I felt like I gained a new family of fellow military brothers and sisters," Rushing says. "But also, in just a few days, EBV provided a road map of everything I was missing in my business plan. I went home with pages of action notes to make my business better."

ADDITIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans, Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families offers V-WISE (Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship) and Veteran EDGE, a conference for veterans or veteran family business owners who are ready to scale their growth.

Find out more at ivmf.syracuse.edu.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S D'ANIELLO INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

Participants take part in the in-person portion of Syracuse University's EBV, a no-cost, intensive boot camp training for veteran-owned small businesses.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S D'ANIELLO INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

Willie Reddic, associate professor at the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University, works with veteran-owned business leaders during a class at the D'Aniello Institute's EBV program.

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