



John Jay Veterans (L-R): Professor Kwando M. Kinshasa, U.S. Marines; Veterans Affairs Coordinator Welby Alcantara, U.S. Marines; Student Brad Davis, U.S. Army; Student Darren Harris, U.S. Navy; Veterans Association President Julio Torres, U.S. Army

From the Field to the Classroom

Vets at John Jay

By Peter Dodenhoff

At John Jay's 2013 Commencement on May 28, graduates and guests gave a tumultuous roar of appreciation to the 141 military veterans in the senior class who, adorned with red, white and blue tassels on their robes, were about to receive their college degrees.

John Jay, long a home to countless military veterans, continues to win recognition as a "military friendly school" (*GI Jobs* magazine) and one of the Top 50 "Best for Vets" schools (militarytimes.com). Now, with the active and enthusiastic support of the John Jay College Foundation Board of Trustees, led by board chairman Jules Kroll, vice chairman Arthur J. Mirante II and trustee Peter Beshar, who chairs a special veterans committee created by the board, the College has begun effecting sweeping changes on campus to help student veterans, and actively engaging outside partners to work collaboratively on critical veterans' issues.

The foundation board's call to action came on the heels of a report from the CUNY Task Force on Veterans Affairs, a multi-campus panel chaired by President Jeremy Travis. The report, released in April 2013, offers a wide-ranging series of recommendations for aiding in the reintegration of military veterans to civilian life, in such areas as strengthening campus services to veterans, out-of-state tuition policies, credits for military experience and leveraging corporate opportunities.

The board convened a roundtable of executives from the corporate and nonprofit sectors to discuss how to further the College's and

corporate efforts in education and employment of veterans. With representation from such entities as Bank of America, CitiGroup, Credit Suisse, JP Morgan Chase, Marsh & McLennan, Pfizer, Verizon, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and the nonprofit HELP USA, the discussion produced conclusions in four key areas:

Interacting with employers to help veterans; developing “soft skills,” including résumé-building, interviewing and networking; identifying for prospective employers the curricular programs that might be most relevant to their needs; and using John Jay, with its population of some 500 veteran students, as a setting to test new ideas.

Further roundtable sessions are envisioned, with additional corporate and nonprofit partners, to consider how to expand the initiative’s scope and impact.

Not surprisingly, John Jay is taking the lead in the overall effort to help student veterans, a key element of which was the hiring last year of Welby Alcantara as the College’s Veterans Affairs Coordinator. Alcantara brings to the position his experience as

veterans’ coordinator at City College, as well as eight years’ service in the U.S. Marine Corps. “A lot of people don’t understand the plight of a student veteran,” said Alcantara. “We’re here to help them with reintegration, not only to school but to civilian life in general.”

Working closely with the John Jay Veterans Association, which includes Association President Julio Torres and Vice President Carolina Vasquez, Alcantara oversees a lounge for the use of student veterans who need a retreat where they can bond and share experiences with each other, although he emphasized the importance of “having vets engage with the broader student community.”

A Veterans Academic Support Team (VAST) pulls together a variety of college resources to smooth the path to reintegration, including admissions, financial aid, academic advisement, accessibility services, the Women’s Center, and much more. “We have a variety of new programs to integrate student veterans into campus life,” said Alcantara. “The majority of our veterans are first-generation college students and many are from out of state,” he added. “The bottom line is that they all have the work

ethic to be successful. Their military experience makes them more worldly-wise and better students.”

On the drawing board is a Veterans Immersion Program (VIP) to provide personal, academic and professional programming that will assist veterans in making a successful transition to civilian life.

The journey of John Jay’s student veterans does not end with graduation; alumni engagement is every bit as important. One of the many who have already crossed that threshold is Christopher Neff (BA ’12), a former marine who served two tours of duty in Iraq and now works with the Single Stop Veterans Initiative, a Manhattan-based counseling program. A participant in the pilot Edge4Vets program, a workshop series aimed at helping veterans transfer their military experience into the civilian workplace, Neff says he has learned to reapply core values of the military, including discipline, work ethic and honor. “It’s not that veterans should forget everything the military taught them,” he said, “but rather embrace it all. It will give us the edge in a competitive job market.” JJ



A Conversation with Trustee Peter Beshar

The John Jay College Foundation Board of Trustees has taken a leading role in making our military-friendly school even more so. Heading that effort is Peter Beshar, Executive Vice President and General Counsel at Marsh & McLennan Companies. He discussed his role with *Justice Matters*.

Justice Matters: What is there in your background or experience that helps to inform your interest in veterans?

Beshar: I had the privilege of serving as a special assistant to former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance on the Yugoslav peace negotiations. It was the first time that I had been exposed to the extraordinary professionalism of the military. Then about two or three years ago I was invited to the national security seminar at the U.S. Army War College, and it was fascinating to see how strategic and sophisticated these military leaders are. The Air Force colonel I was assigned to sit behind me and said, “I have your six.” I didn’t know what that meant, so he said, “I’m at 6 o’clock for you. I have your back.”

My theory is that John Jay should “have the six” of the extraordinary veterans who have served. So I formulated three questions that I presented to the Board of Trustees last year: Is there a compelling need to help veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan? Does John Jay have a voice in this debate, a singular role to play? If so, where can we make the most valuable contribution?

Justice Matters: Let’s look at them one at a time – is there a need?

Beshar: The answer is a resounding “yes.” We have more people returning from Iraq and Afghanistan than at any time since World War II. Roughly 2.3 million members of the armed forces served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and some of them have done multiple deployments. These people have developed extraordinary leadership and other skills, but they have not worked in a civilian

environment, so the transition can be challenging.

Justice Matters: What about John Jay’s voice with respect to this issue?

Beshar: I asked President Travis to do an analysis of how many veterans are students at John Jay. It turns out the number is probably around 500. With a student body of 15,000, that gives us a greater percentage of veterans in the student body than virtually any university outside of the service academies. So I believe John Jay does have a powerful voice in this debate, and if John Jay can become a leader in what it means to attract talented veterans, help assimilate them and then help them find jobs when they graduate, it could well be a model for universities all over the United States.

Justice Matters: What kind of contribution are we talking about?

Beshar: The first thing is, how do you attract the people to the school? In the post-9/11 GI Bill, you only get a stipend for 36 months, so it only gets you part of the way there if you don’t have the money to pay for the fourth year of college. President Travis has made a real effort to focus on making sure vets get at least one year of academic credit for their military experience. A second component of this question is how do you assimilate them and give them a good chance to be successful in school and get a good job? Many students, including vets, have to learn how to work within a corporate framework or a university framework and how to advocate for themselves and network a bit.

Justice Matters: What about traditional coursework?

Beshar: In May, we conducted a “Veterans Roundtable” for corporations and nonprofits headquartered in New York. We were stunned by the response. The corporations involved in our first roundtable were incredibly helpful in identifying specific areas of interest. Some logical areas might be cybersecurity, which

is a burgeoning area, or forensic accounting investigations. There are different disciplines that you can learn at John Jay that would position you quite well for getting jobs with these corporations.

Justice Matters: The corporate roundtable helped to paint a picture of what various organizations are doing for veterans. Are there plans for future gatherings of this kind, perhaps with expanded participation?

Beshar: Absolutely. If folks are interested in working with us, we’d be thrilled to have them. You focused on the corporations, but there are several nonprofits there as well. Maria Cuomo Cole, Governor Cuomo’s sister, is the CEO of HELP USA, which focuses on housing for the homeless and construction of affordable housing. We also had the CEO of Four Block, which is a group that helps veterans.

Justice Matters: Is it safe to say, then, that implementation of the committee’s overall effort on behalf of vets is underway?

Beshar: The roundtable was in many ways a crucial step in that regard. The hiring of a dedicated veterans, representative within the school was also important. We’re ready to deploy some actual resources, so I think we are well into implementation.

Justice Matters: Have you had much direct interaction with military veterans at John Jay?

Beshar: Most assuredly. I love John Jay, and I am just bowled over by the extraordinary diversity, energy and sense of vibrancy. The individuals I’ve met are really something else. They’re mature, articulate, energetic, and you’re just so eager to work with them. I really feel honored to be part of John Jay, and can’t say enough about the commitment from President Travis and all the student veterans to make this college a leading example of how to help our veterans prepare for a purposeful life after the military. JJ