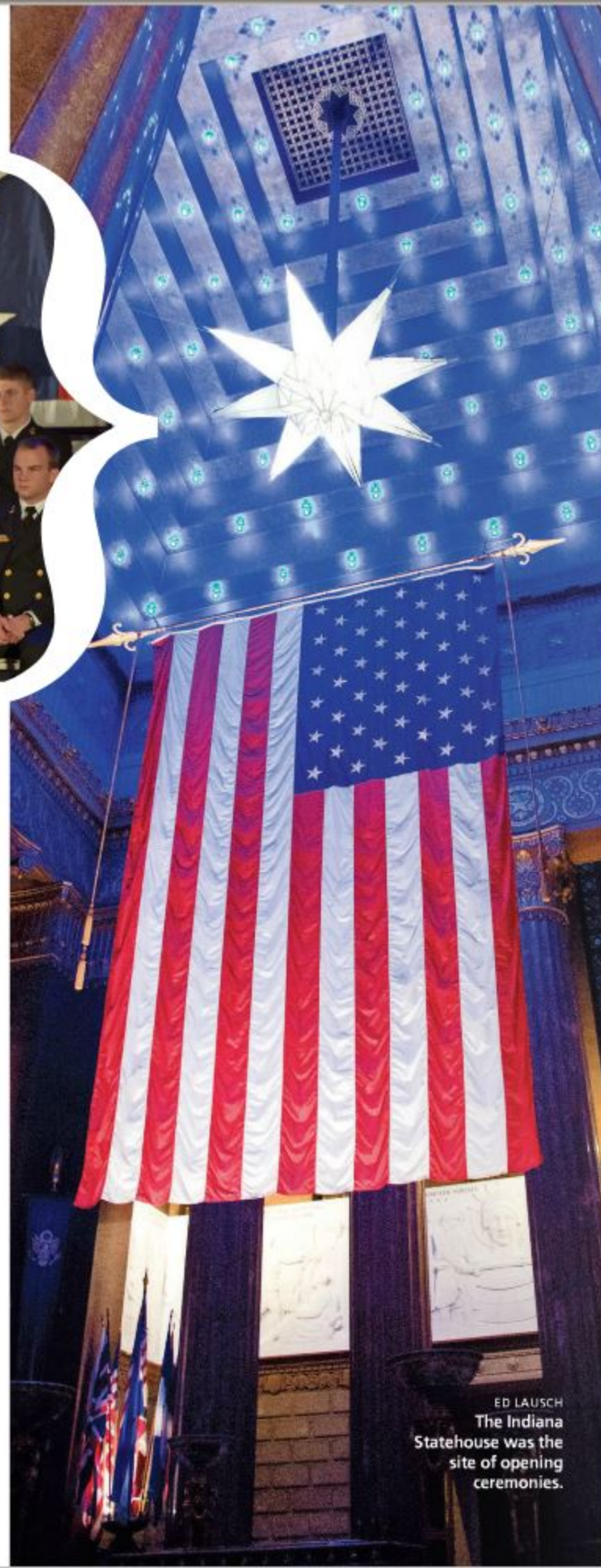


PHOTO PROVIDED
Lieutenant General John F. Thompson, USAF, gives the keynote address at the 2014 EBV graduation ceremony in the Purdue Armory.



ED LAUSCH
The Indiana Statehouse was the site of opening ceremonies.

Jump start

Purdue program gives vets a business boost

BY KATHY MAYER

Each fall, about 25 students — all veterans with service-related disabilities — spend nine days in intensive entrepreneurship training at Purdue University. They leave armed with know-how, a business plan, confidence and a squadron of mentors and peers they can turn to for more help.

When Alex Ramirez, fresh out of the Army, came to town in 2013 for the program on the Purdue campus, he had two sons, a service disability and an idea for a small business. Today, the Vine Grove, Kentucky, resident is successfully oper-

ating Universal Spartan LLC, selling outdoor sports and tactical gear in small and big lots.

Former Marine Jeremy Campbell did the same in 2014 and is now running Semper Fitness LLC Chicago, an Illinois personal training and rehab service.

Indiana's own Sara Creech, an Air Force veteran, completed the same program at another site. Today, she runs the 43-acre Blue Yonder Organic Farm in North Salem, sells at farmers markets, and shares her experience with students in the local program.

For all three, the free Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities, which includes online study and a nine-day campus stay, the time was inspiring, motivating and educational.

Classroom and community time

Besides classroom and experiential learning, they enjoy the community. Last fall, students were guests at a luncheon at a local pizza restaurant, and this fall they'll visit MatchBOX Coworking Studio.

"This was my first time in Lafayette, and everyone was open to veterans," Ramirez says. "We went to shops and restaurants, they said thank you for what you've done, and everyone was military-friendly."

Campbell, too, reports what he calls an "above-and-beyond" experience. "I felt at home on campus and felt like I had been there for a long time."

Best of all, he says, "I learned a great deal about small business and came away with an understanding of how to choose the best way to optimize my personal situation while still providing value to ➤



ED LAUSCH
2014 EBV students (photos above) enjoy the Military Appreciation pre-game in Ross-Ade Stadium.



ED LAUSCH
Student and Marine veteran Ken Nelson motivates the Purdue football team.



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Air Force veteran Sara Creech runs Blue Yonder Organic Farm in North Salem.

the consumer and target markets.”

That’s the goal, says Rick Cosier, academic director for the local program, who was instrumental in Purdue becoming one of the host sites.

“These veterans want independence. They want to succeed on their own,” Cosier says of the participants, who all have post-September 11, 2001, service disabilities. “They really appreciate the information on how to start and grow a small business.”

Besides the tangible information, Cosier says, “They gain self-confidence as they go through the program, and they get a feeling of accomplishment from starting their own business.”

New businesses launched

Since the national program was first hosted here in 2009, more than 125 veterans have completed the program.

“They’ve launched all kinds of businesses — supply chain, lawn care, service sector,” Cosier says. “They have some idea before they get here what they want to do. Some will come up with new ideas while they are here or change their ideas.”

Already, about half of the startups launched “have gained some traction,” he reports. Some of those include Veterans at Ease, a nonprofit web-based program that helps veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder; Moderno Inc.,

a California construction and landscape business; and Young G’s BBQ of Waterloo, Iowa, which has product on the shelves throughout the Midwest.

Involvement is “rewarding and heartwarming” for program staff and guest presenters, too, Cosier says. “It’s a way to pay back in some small degree, to show the appreciation we have for veterans.”

Creech, whose farm is about an hour from Lafayette, was a guest presenter last fall. She completed the program in March 2014 at Louisiana State University and spoke at Purdue to give back and to connect with veterans.

“This program was a huge stepping stone for me,” Creech says. “It’s the toolbox veterans need to get the education, the confidence, resources and support to actually start a business.”

Veteran-centered program

For local program director Muna DeStefano, who coordinates all the details of the campus studies, “it’s a job that allows me to get to know and become friends with these vets.” She’s witnessed their teamwork, interactions and camaraderie.

“I have the privilege of seeing their determination and commitment used to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams,” she says. “Bringing these vets to campus allows them a small taste of what

“It’s the toolbox veterans need to get the education, the confidence, resources and support to actually start a business.”

SARA CREECH

Purdue is, and they never forget the impact Purdue had on them.”

Many have inquired about pursuing a degree at Purdue, and one has enrolled in a master’s program, she says.

“The essence of this program is our focus on vets,” Cosier says. “They come first and foremost. That’s the bottom line.”

Ramirez says, “It’s an exceptional program. The people there are incredible. It got me going faster with my business. It helped me in so many ways.”

Program welcomes volunteers

The next Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities at Purdue will run from October 30 to November 7.

Volunteer mentors, speakers and others who might help can learn more about opportunities from Muna DeStefano, program director. Contact her at (765) 494-4392 or mdestefa@purdue.edu.

Program snapshot

Students in the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp spend about four to six weeks at home in mentored online study, then come to campus for a nine-day residency and receive a year of follow-up mentoring.

The free program is open to those with service-connected disabilities who were in the military after September 11, 2001. Veterans are accepted based on their passion for being an entrepreneur, their business concept and the potential for success.

The bootcamp was founded at Syracuse University in 2007 and is supported by the Burton Blatt Institute there. Purdue joined the consortium in 2009.

Classes are now offered various times during the year at eight sites that also include Cornell, Florida State, Louisiana State, Texas A&M, the University of California Los Angeles and the University of Connecticut.