

WHAT'S NEXT FOR VETS?

For some, it's business ownership

By Mark R. Smith
Senior Writer

Robert Worthington, an Air Force veteran, worked as an air traffic controller with the military and as a civilian. He wanted to make a career switch.

Thinking about what he loved – teaching kids the basics of basketball – was the easy part. Figuring out how to turn that passion into a successful business was a daunting task.

Worthington is one of many veterans who want to work for themselves once they retire but many are unclear how to make a dream become reality.

With help from a statewide program called Project Opportunity, Worthington founded the Columbia-based Hoops Drills For Skills Basketball (HCFS) Camp.

He knows he couldn't have arrived at his current happy station in life simply on sweat equity running the youth basketball program that also includes camps and travel teams.

'A Roadmap'

As someone “who is passionate about what I do, I still had no way to know what I had to do to make my business a success,” Worthington said. “Project Opportunity provided a roadmap about how to turn that passion into a business. It also gave me an opportunity to network with many professionals,” including a videographer who shot and edited videos used in tournaments and created three promo videos.

Project Opportunity “is a fantastic way to go,” Worthington said of Joe Giordano's program.

Giordano founded Project Opportunity in 2010. The retired master sergeant gradually built the nonprofit and now offers classes all around Maryland.

“We see an increase in interest from veterans in becoming entrepreneurs every year,” he said. “In recent years, we've seen some of these small, veteran-run businesses hit the wall, so we help those owners redirect with a 30-hour course where we teach how to research, write and finalize a comprehensive business plan.”

And the retired vets can't beat the price.

“It's free of charge,” Giordano said, noting that some organizations make donations and offer grants as do private foundations and corporate sponsors like BB&T and PNC Bank, which also provide subject matter experts in the areas of commercial lending and cash flow analysis.

“The economy is great and the number of small businesses is growing so we expect to see individuals who have great ideas make them come to life,” he said, pointing to Project Opportunity's extensive network that include state agencies, economic development entities and fraternal organizations.

Project Opportunity uses the Next Level training program, which draws on theories from psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, sociology and organizational development to create transformation in individuals



Photo by Emily Calkins

Robert Worthington watches over a youth basketball game at Meadowbrook Athletic Complex for one of his Hoops Drills For Skills Basketball camps. The Air Force veteran founded his Columbia-based company with help from a statewide program based out of Salisbury, Project Opportunity.

Coming Soon

Coming up on the Project Opportunity agenda next spring is a class in Howard County that will be held in Columbia Gateway Business Park at the Maryland Center for Entrepreneurship (MCE), which is providing training.

Larry Twele, CEO of the Howard County Economic Development Authority, said the county is home “to nearly 16,000 veteran residents who bring unique skills, experience and leadership to our entrepreneurial landscape. We assist many veteran-owned companies to support their venture success in our business incubator and even more through our Catalyst Loan Fund. Supporting Project Opportunity through the Innovation Center.”

and teams and presents subject matter experts such as certified public accountants, lawyers and marketing professionals. Some are ex-military, but all have an active interest in military service through families and friends.

Time for Redirection

Chuck Davis, a U.S. Navy vet and 2014 Project

Opportunity grad, found himself at a career crossroads several years ago after retiring from UPS and wanted a more flexible schedule. He was a physical therapist and is currently owner of Kiss My Glass in Annapolis, found out about Project Opportunity via an article after he'd founded his company.

“I was feeling good about the business, had researched it enough, had a great concept and a foundation for my business model, but I lacked a plan of growth,” said Davis. “So, I knew how to start it but not how to build it and I knew I needed that roadmap.”

As it turned out, Project Opportunity “was everything I thought it would be. That it was designed for vets made it even more interesting. My biggest takeaway was that every speaker wanted to be there and was thankful for our service.”

Project Opportunity is just one option in the region where vet entrepreneurs can get a kickstart for their businesses. The state of Maryland runs the Veteran-Owned Small Business Enterprise Program.

By law, that program calls for more than 50 agencies to direct at least one percent of expenditures to small businesses that are at least 51 percent owned and/or controlled by a veteran. The program is about six years old and in fiscal 2018, state agencies and programs “accounted for two percent” of the spend, said the Governor's Office of Small, Minority & Women Business Affairs spokesperson Alison Tavik.

“The program offers subcontracting procurement opportunities for the state,” said Tavik, noting that 2019 is the state's Year of the Veteran.

To expand the program, legislation would be needed to increase the required 1 percent. “So today, we're making veterans aware of the opportunity at hand and building our base of vendors. Our office never met the goal in six years before fiscal 2018. It was a great achievement in that relatively short length of time.”

Opening Doors

In Howard County, Lisa Terry, manager of the Office of Veterans and Military Families, said the number of vet-owned businesses “is increasing, especially given the number of the defense contractors and sub-contractors in the area.”

Howard County offers the Veteran-Owned Business Enterprise program and Terry said one percent of total procurement funding is set aside for vet-certified businesses by the Veteran's Administration.

Like Giordano, she feels that veterans “are more likely to enter the workplace as entrepreneurs because they have a bigger cause in mind, leadership skills and are dependable.”

She said, “Entrepreneurship also provides a chance for service-disabled vets to pursue meaningful careers,” adding that support will increase from the MCE as well as the Small Business Administration, economic development authorities and incubators that support entrepreneurs.