

Support for Student Veterans

Ryan: My name is Ryan. I served in the United States Army for 12 years. I did three tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq.

Melissa: My name is Melissa. I'm a counselor at the VA.

Ryan: I got out in 2011. I found myself going through a divorce, homeless, jobless, purposeless. It kind of went in phases as far as how I dealt with it. Phase one was a lot of self-medication. In my case it was usually through alcohol. Phase two is man, that's a really bad idea. I'm going to go get help. So, then it's doctor-prescribed medication. So, that certainly helped. Phase three and four is just getting back to a truly healthy lifestyle.

My girlfriend, I was talking to her and she had said, "I'm getting ready to go to Eastern Michigan University. They gave me this course outline. I think it sounds like what it is you're saying you want to do with your life."

Melissa: You had an idea of what you wanted to do, and you knew where you wanted to go to school for that. But it was that how do I then turn that into a career after I complete the degree?

Ryan: The program I did to go to school was vocational rehabilitation. And I got a phone call one day saying, "Hey, my name is Melissa. I just wanted to let you know I'm your new voc rehab counselor." And the timely fashion and the amount of communication that Melissa had with me was the start of this lady is not playing around. I need to make sure I'm at least matching her effort.

Melissa: As a rehabilitation counselor, my job is to help the Veteran identify what their unique strengths are and abilities and then try to help them plug that into a career path. What we do is we identify that job that they want and then we work our way backwards from there. And my role is to identify all the different services that the Veteran might need in order to reach that potential.

Ryan: I didn't need a lot of accommodations, but I had a little memo that I gave to all of my professors that said, "If I choose to sit in the back of the class when I might normally sit up front, don't say anything to him about it. Leave it alone. He's sitting there for a reason. If there's a test coming up, make sure he knows about it so that I can go sit in a quiet room with a proctor and nobody else around because I do have test anxiety."

Melissa: Yeah, it's more about working smarter instead of working harder. And getting a level playing field to compensate for the aspects of the disability that create that limitation.

Ryan: By the time I got to Eastern I felt like my head was mostly screwed on straight. But there were still a lot of rough times even then. One of my guys had committed suicide. There were a lot of struggles. Sometimes I just needed to vent. Melissa is absolutely great. She would say, "Okay, are you actually looking for a solution to try and figure out how to approach it?" Yeah, I am. She would go through with me.



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To this day when I think about where I was and where I am now, it brings me to tears. I wish I would have had somebody like me that was willing to turn around and reach back and be like, hey, I've already been there, been through that, let me help you up.

Melissa: As a human being, we need to have something that we can connect to that connects us to other people. And I think when you were at your most lost it was when you had the least amount of connections. Having somewhere to go, something to do, and then have it on top of all that be something really meaningful is, I think, what led you to where you are today more than anything.

Ryan: There's a lot of people along the way that have contributed to me being where I am.

Melissa: And we're here and we want to help. We're ready to help. It just takes that step.

Ryan: You gotta be willing to ask for help.



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