

America's Veterans to Tennessee Engineers

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 24, 2009)

I was proud to receive an invitation to attend the upcoming special event at the New Hope Center on Friday, February 27, 2008, at 8:00 AM where the Memorandum of Agreement for the America's Veterans to Tennessee Engineers program will be signed. Not only am I extremely proud that the New Hope Center was chosen for this auspicious occasion, but being a Vietnam Veteran myself, the heart of this unusual and unique program whereby our Veterans are given a most unusual chance to gain an advanced education and a good job here in East Tennessee, makes me even more proud to be included.

The America's Veterans to Tennessee Engineers program provides our Veterans the opportunity to obtain degrees in the critical engineering fields of Nuclear, Chemical, Mechanical, Civil or Electrical Engineering. Basic requirements are a high school diploma or equivalent and an honorable discharge or serving honorably in the National Guard or Reserves. A "Secret" clearance is desired. Wounded Veterans, Purple Heart awardees and other significant award recipients are afforded additional selection weighting.

An insight into the way this program is being received by the Veterans can be gained by examining the story of one Purple Heart Veteran who withdrew his application because he was returning to Walter Reed Hospital for more surgery. He did not want to be selected and deny another person the chance to participate in the program. He wanted to delay being considered until he recovered from this next round of surgery and could be ready to fully focus on his academics. He hoped to be able to take a course online while he was still convalescing. "This guy will certainly be a keeper for some organization in the future," says Kevin Smith, Deputy Manager of the Y-12 National Nuclear Security Administration Site Office, who is a champion for this new program.

Something else for which those of us in East Tennessee can take pride is that this new and unusual program is an Oak Ridge and Knoxville area initiative. This is yet another example of the strength of purpose that exists here in our region and also the collaborative nature of our government, educational, and industrial leaders.

Four Universities/Colleges, Roane State Community College, Pellissippi State Technical Community College, Tennessee Technological University and the University of Tennessee system, are working in support of this exciting initiative. They each see the value of attracting Veterans and know the quality of individual they can expect from our men and women returning from military service.

Thirteen Corporations, B&W Y-12, TVA, GEM Technologies, B&W Clinch River, UT-Battelle, Pro2Serve, Uranium Services Enrichment Corporation, Energy Solutions, Science Applications International Corporation, Bechtel Construction, Information International Associates, EnergX and Tetra Tech, are supporting the effort. These corporations also see the value of attracting the caliber of individual who comes out of the military and who excels in these areas of engineering.

Fourteen supporting organizations, National Nuclear Security Administration, U.S. Department of Energy Oak Ridge Office, Tennessee Valley Corridor, Oak Ridge Associated Universities, City of Oak Ridge City Council, Knox County, City of Knoxville, Roane County, Anderson County, Akins Crisp Pubic Strategies, East Tennessee Economical Council, Innovation Valley, Inc., Lawler-Wood, LLC Construction and Wackenhut Services, Inc. – Oak Ridge, have also indicated their willingness to help. These organizations realize the value brought to the community when Veterans settle in our midst and gain advanced degrees along with good jobs.

While this program is wholeheartedly supported by the NNSA Deputy Manager, Kevin Smith, himself a Veteran of the Air Force where he was a commander of an F-16 fighter squadron, he quickly acknowledges the importance of the whole consortium of Oak Ridge's and Knoxville's technical,

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engineering and educational organizations. Together they have succeeded in creating an amazing opportunity for engineering employment and educational opportunities for America's military Veterans.

The program is an excellent example of what is referred to as a Scientific, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics or STEM program as promoted by the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA). This organization is the principal association for state directors of technology and their staff members providing professional development and leadership around the effective use of technology in education to enhance competitiveness in the global workforce.

The need for attention to scientific, technical, engineering and mathematics areas of study in students of all ages is being recognized as a key strategy for the United States to regain leadership in key educational instruction. A report written by SETDA highlights the need for societal changes in America if we are to successfully compete and lead the world in the next generation.

The SETDA report continues by noting that "the United States will not be able to meet its workforce needs as early as 2015 based on the need for 400,000 new graduates in STEM related fields. Yet, today's students continue to pursue degrees in non-STEM careers." The America's Veterans to Tennessee Engineers program is an attempt to change that paradigm.

Not only will it address the need for increasing our key engineering graduates, it provides an avenue of hope for our Veterans that they might not otherwise realize. It becomes very personal when the Veteran becomes a coworker.

Brian Paul is the first America's Veterans to Tennessee Engineer program participant to work at Y-12. Brian describes the program as "an answer to prayer" and is looking forward to a long and interesting career at Y-12. He is a junior in nuclear engineering at the University of Tennessee and working part time at Y-12.

Terry Patterson is the second program participant working at Y-12. He has recently returned from Iraq and was given a business card among many other things as he was being discharged. Thinking little of it at the time, the card was placed with other materials Terry received. Later, just for curiosity sake, when he again saw the card he made the phone call and got Kevin Smith. Kevin invited Terry to come for a visit and he saw the program as a good fit. Terry is attending Roane State Community College and majoring in mechanical engineering.

"The societal attitudes and perception of engineering, science, and mathematics careers must change at home and in school," said Mary Ann Wolf, SETDA's Executive Director. The America's Veterans to Tennessee Engineers is certainly an excellent example of changing societal attitudes. We can all be proud of the leaders who did the research to understand how the local organizations could pull together to make this program succeed.

The program has grown out of the Tennessee Valley Corridor Summits championed by U.S. Congressman Zach Wamp. Through the collaborative networking encouraged in this vibrant forum, such program ideas can surface, be cultivated and grow into full-fledged initiatives. America's Veterans to Tennessee Engineers continues to evolve and may well develop into a model for the rest of the nation.

A goal of having 30 Veterans actively engaged in the program by the fall of 2009 is achievable. There are already five Veterans in the program attending classes at the University of Tennessee and Roane State Community College. There are seven more that have been accepted into the program and are now

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completing their Tennessee college applications. It is worthy of note that approximately half of these Veterans have a disability!

Kevin Smith heads up the interim program Steering Committee that is actively seeking to attract Veterans into the program. Several avenues are being pursued to get the word out to these Veterans. Kevin says that Veterans don't always have a broad perspective of the job and educational opportunities available to them. This new program as it becomes more widely known will help the Veterans see greater possibilities for their future careers.

The upcoming event on Friday, February 27, 2008, at the New Hope Center will feature Major General Mari K. Eder, deputy Chief, Army Reserve as the keynote speaker. The celebration of this milestone of creative collaboration and the sincere desires of all participating organizations to truly provide substantial and specific assistance to our nation's soldiers who are now Veterans in need of opportunities in education and employment is a remarkable achievement.

The people who have succeeded in making this program a reality are to be congratulated...yet, they are exactly the kind of people who do not seek such recognition, rather they are the kind of leaders who are continually looking for ways to improve their own organizations as well as the communities in which they live. We in Oak Ridge and Knoxville are blessed to have several such individuals in our midst and this time America's Veterans are beneficiaries as are the local companies who hire them.



Brian Paul, a Veteran who is now a Y-12 worker and University of Tennessee student in Nuclear Engineering

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Terry Patterson, also a Veteran working at Y-12 and a student at Roane State Community College in Mechanical Engineering