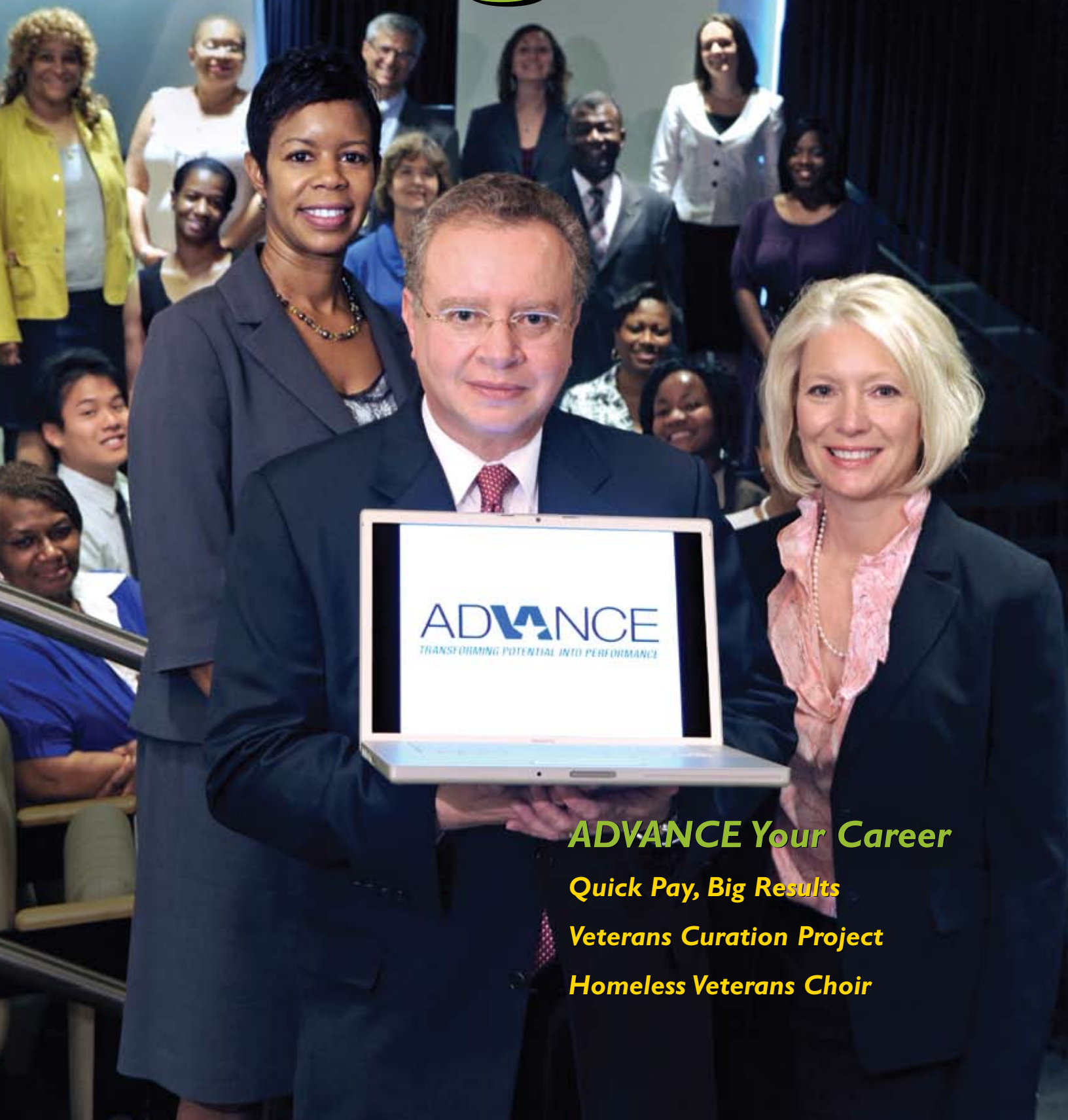


VAanguard

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ADVANCE Your Career

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Veterans Curation Project

Homeless Veterans Choir

Uncovering a New Life Back Home

Forensic work in Iraq leads to job skills for veterans in the States.

Imagine sifting through the rubble of mass graves, enduring dizzying temperatures topping out at 130 degrees, all the while knowing you could be shot by the enemy at any time. That was life for Dr. Michael A. Trimble for six deployments over three years in Iraq. Trimble is an archaeologist and chief of the Archives and Analysis Branch of the Army Corps of Engineers.

National Security Presidential Directive 37 (NSPD-37), issued under the Bush Administration in 2004, sent Trimble and his fellow archaeologists to Iraq to excavate nine mass graves, and “put all the evidence together to show the systematic killing of the Kurds in the mid-’80s,” he said.

“Mass grave work is usually done when wars are over,” Trimble noted. “There is not another instance in modern times where, while the war was on, people decided, ‘We’re going to hop around, try to do the work between the pauses in the war.’ If I had to do it again, I’d certainly think twice about it. It was very dangerous.”

Trimble’s guardian angels during this time were the Army and Marine Corps personnel who were responsible for the shelter, feeding and daily existence of his crew. “When you are out in a combat environment and people are trying to kill you, and you’re not allowed to have weapons, you never forget the people who keep you alive,” he said.

The matter-of-fact way in which he says this is an indication that he’s said it before, perhaps to friends in trying to find a way to repay these individuals for their service.

One of those friends

found a solution: a way of paying returning disabled service members while they learn new job skills, and at the same time solving a problem that the Corps of Engineers has had since the 1930s. That problem was a backlog in the curation—proper labeling, photographing and cataloging—of 80 years of ceramics, glass and other items found at digs in the U.S.

The backlog had left about a

football field’s worth of objects and records to be curated. The solution for both dilemmas was the Veterans Curation Project, through which disabled veterans get paid to learn new job skills while helping preserve the sizable collection of historic artifacts held by the Corps of Engineers.

Timing is everything. Around the same time that Trimble formulated the concept of the Veterans Curation Project, the Obama administration was looking for worthy projects to receive stimulus money distributed as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The project was awarded \$3.5 million in funding, allowing the Corps to open three labs, in Augusta, Ga., St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., within a few months of each other.

In attendance at the openings was Jo-Ellen Darcy, assistant secretary of the Army for civil works, who described the labs as “an innovative approach to supporting returning veterans of all services with jobs and training in a variety of technical skills. At the same time, the labs will advance the curation of archaeological and historic properties that have come

into the Corps’ possession over the years as a result of construction at its water project sites around the country.”

The premier site was Augusta, which opened on Oct. 20, 2009. Veterans entering the lab found high-tech camera equipment, computers filled with programs they would learn to use, like Microsoft



Dr. Michael Trimble maps evidence during the excavation of a mass grave in Iraq.

DAVID HEMPENSTALL/ACE



DAVID KNOERLEIN/ACE

Left: Reginold Fryson positions an artifact under a digital copy camera as Christopher Bowman steadies the platform at the curation lab in Augusta, Ga.

Word, PowerPoint, Excel spreadsheets and Access databases, plus boxes and boxes of uncatalogued property: man-made axes; 50-year-old ceramics; glass shards which, when pieced together, tell their own story; and even human teeth.

They also found curators, instructors and staff who were passionate about helping veterans. That's what many veterans hoped for when they came into the project. What most didn't think about was finding others like themselves, who weren't quite the same as when they left for war; others who are finding it hard to get a job, either because they don't have the needed high-tech skills, or because their disabilities are causing them to reevaluate their career paths.

Navy veteran Reginold Fryson was one of the first 12 students in the project. At age 26, he was injured just after returning from Iraq, when the brakes failed on the firetruck he was driving. Fryson doesn't know exactly what happened after that, but the truck landed in two pieces on either side of the road; he landed on his back in the middle.

After six months of recuperation, Fryson tried to return to work as a firefighter. But left-side weakness and memory loss made that impossible. During this time, Fryson also lost the family member he was closest to, his grandmother.

Lonely and depressed, "My confidence was almost gone," Fryson said of the time in his life just before coming to the Curation Project. For Fryson, the Curation Project is more than just a place that gave him job skills; it's where he "found a new family," he said. "We kind of instantly bonded with each other. We instantly had each other's back."

Lack of confidence is surprisingly common among these veterans. For Trimble, the idea that the brave service members who watched over his crew would return without confidence was a shock. "I think the most rewarding part of the project is seeing these

individuals not only gain the skills, but—something I never thought too much about—they believing that they have worth to society and they have a job they can do that makes them proud of themselves is a very big deal."

A classmate of Fryson's, Ben Berkman, was a Purple Heart recipient who did two tours in Iraq as a scout sniper. He and his company endured 20 improvised explosive device attacks and came home with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder so severe that when Berkman first came to the unit, he was monosyllabic. "He was only giving one- or two-word answers," Trimble recalled, "and I thought, 'This is not going to work for this guy.'" But with patience, it did work.

Eventually, Berkman became a leader in his group, and only six months after he started the program, he spoke at the opening of the Veterans Curation Project lab in Washington, D.C. He walked to the podium with confidence and told the 50-plus people in attendance how the program helped him gain job skills and more. "It's helped me adjust back into society," he said. "I don't have to see a psychiatrist as much."

Adjusting back into society is an issue for the veterans at all three Curation Project centers, where medical problems range from significant physical injuries to severe PTSD and TBI. "The TBI is very traumatic," said Trimble. "People learn at a slower pace. You have to be very patient with them. This is very tedious work. But I see that as a good thing because they're going to get frustrated at a real job out on the street. So they need to control it."

Cody Gregory, a senior airman who was deployed to Afghanistan from 2006 to 2007, agreed that the chance to readjust to a real work environment in the safety of the Curation Project lab is invaluable. "It's been really nice to go to an office setting every day," he said. "I'm back in a

federal building, learning to commute, little things that people forget about, especially us guys that have been to war and then come back; things like traffic. Those are the things that are huge obstacles that I'm learning to overcome slowly.

"The people in this program know where I'm coming from," he added. "It's really great to know that they're working with me on this."

Every veteran's unique story helps program organizers determine how to shape the future of the Curation Project, just as small shards of pottery, when pieced together, help archaeologists discover an older way of life. The Augusta, St. Louis and Washington, D.C., Veterans Curation Project labs have as many different archaeological finds as they do veterans' stories.

But Trimble summed up the project's common thread: "I think there are only two components at this moment—doing the curation and gaining the skills that come with it, and making them believe in themselves again."

It's clear that amid the 80 years of finds that they sort and photograph, what these veterans really have discovered is the opportunity for a new life. **VA**

By Melodee Mercer

When the Money is Gone

What happens when the stimulus money is gone, but the need continues? There is a bill in the House (H.R. 5282), "To provide funds to the Army Corps of Engineers to hire veterans and members of the Armed Forces to assist the Corps with curation and historic preservation activities, and for other purposes." The bill was sponsored by Rep. John Barrow (D-Ga.), who attended the second graduation at the Augusta site. At the time of this printing, the bill had 45 co-sponsors. Of the 12 who graduated with the first class in April, four now have full-time jobs.