

# Program matches N.J. veterans with business-world mentors to help them find jobs

By Nyier Abdou/The Star-Ledger

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Chris Petrosini just moved into his new cubicle at Wyndham Worldwide in Parsippany. As a platoon leader handling security in Baghdad, Chris Petrosini was out in a volatile environment for more than 30 hours a stretch. But when the two-tour veteran returned home in 2008, he entered a different kind of hostile territory — the New Jersey job market.

As a platoon leader handling security for logistics patrols in Baghdad, Chris Petrosini was in a dangerous environment for more than 30 hours a stretch. But when the two-tour Army veteran returned to Flemington at the end of 2008, he entered a different kind of hostile territory — the New Jersey job market.

"You go from getting on the road every day to not knowing if you're going to come back, to now wearing a suit and tie and trying to sell yourself," said Petrosini, 26, who has a business degree to go with his crisp, efficient manner.

Despite those assets, he was still job-hunting for more than a year.

"For every five people in the state of New Jersey, one person's probably got my resumé," he said.

Enter Mary Falvey, human resources director at the hospitality giant Wyndham Worldwide in Parsippany and a volunteer in a pilot program by Veterans Across America, which matches business-world mentors with returning veterans to help them find jobs.

"When I first met Chris — you can see he's got the twinkle in his eye," said Falvey, who shopped Petrosini's resumé around her extensive network. "He's flexible, he's resourceful, he's a great leader."

In fact, Falvey was so impressed with Petrosini that she steered him to a position within her own company. Last week, Petrosini started his new job as a regional manager in loss prevention at Wyndham Vacation Ownership.

"I'm really excited," Petrosini said as he rolled a chair to the empty desk he had just been assigned — steps away from Falvey's office. "I was working off a Humvee or in a tent, so this is kind of different."

Wesley Poriotis, who co-founded the New York-based Veterans Across America, says his organization developed the Champion Mentor Program, modeled on a similar program at Rutgers University, because veterans lack the single most important asset in finding a private sector job: a network.

"You can send out 5,000 resumés and some 24-year-old recruiter is sitting there checking off boxes," said Poriotis, who lives in Paramus. "If you don't have the right criteria, you're dead."

A veteran's resumé is hard for employers to understand, Poriotis said, but the skills are there — teamwork, discipline, a can-do mentality.

"But that falls on deaf ears because it's like saying you're for God, country and mom's apple pie," he said. "Below the senior leadership, people hire in their own image."

Joe Rojas, 39, a New York computer specialist who serves in the New York National Guard, said he helped Matt Klotz, 31, of Waterford, Conn., translate his experience as a Tomahawk automated systems weapons specialist into business speak — what Klotz called "breaking the language barrier."

"He's a programmer. That's what he does," Rojas said. "But it doesn't say 'programmer' on his resumé."

An online platform called I-Mentor guided a pilot group of 50 mentor matches through a six-month curriculum. Six months later, about 65 percent have found a job, Poriotis said.

Among the success stories is Natalia Baez, a 23-year-old marketing graduate who was living in the Dominican Republic when her brother Marine Cpl. Visnu Gonzalez, then 21, was rendered a quadriplegic by a sniper in Iraq in 2004. The family now lives in Hillsdale.

As the family member of a veteran, Baez was able to enter the Champion Mentor program and was matched with Emily Grant, a 26-year-old partner at the recruitment firm Wesley, Brown & Bartle Co.

Grant worked intensively with Baez. They spoke every day, e-mailed constantly and met weekly. Two months later, Baez was offered a job as a sales coordinator at Univision.

"I believe the only reason I was able to get this job is because you took your time to get to know me," Baez wrote Grant in an e-mail.

"When she went into interviews, my palms sweat like how my palms would sweat if I went into an interview," Grant said. "I really felt like this was my obligation."

Helping veterans integrate into civilian life is critical, said Lt. General Ricardo Sanchez, the former commander of coalition forces in Iraq, who attended the program's launch last year. All soldiers, he said, work through their own degree of post-traumatic stress, and unemployment can drive them to depression.

"They can get disillusioned," Sanchez said. "I believe this is a major source of some of the problems and challenges we're seeing today with suicide — and what we saw after Vietnam, where we had a lot of veterans that wound up either economically deprived or as homeless veterans."