

Episode 5: Focus on Alumni with Steven Goetsch

Kathryn Harth:

Welcome to Get Online from Great Plains IDEA. I'm your host, Kathryn Harth. Thanks for downloading this week's podcast. Get Online has expert advice and creative resources to inform and enrich the online educational experience for both students and faculty.

This is the second in a series of episodes in which we bring you the stories and life achievements of Great Plains IDEA alumni. These short profiles on individuals give listeners a glance into what it's like to follow your dream, face down a challenge, and accomplish something when doubt almost stopped you.

Today's interview is extra special not only because we will hear from Steven Goetsch, United States Air Force veteran and graduate of our Family and Community Services master's degree, but also because we have a guest host! Dr. Elaine Johannes is an associate professor and Extension specialist at Kansas State University, but within Great Plains IDEA she is a triple threat, teaching in three of our online master's programs. Dr. Johannes advised and taught Steve throughout his Great Plains IDEA journey, and so we thought it would be fun for her to do the interview today. Steve is going to tell us a little more about himself and then Elaine will take it away.

Steven Goetsch:

My name is Steve Goetsch. I am a class of 2020 and, I guess, soon-to-be alumni. I'm actually from San Antonio, Texas, I relocated here. I'm not a natural-born Texan I relocated here in 2015. I came through the Air Force, I was there for 22 years. I've been working at the VA as a Public Affairs Specialist in communications since 2014. I love it, it's high paced, also has a little bit of an impact on my education, which I'm sure many people, as they're juggling work and family and in school, is probably the biggest challenge that everyone faces. Yeah, and that's me in a nutshell.

Elaine Johannes:

Steve, I'm so glad to be able to chat with you today. One of the things I think I've admired about you over the years--because I've been able to watch you move from being a brand new master's student to finishing up here, and now I consider you a friend--one of the things I've really appreciated is your persistence and your grit. All these characteristics that you've always had, or did you develop those as you've been pushing through this degree program and all of your changes in your profession?

Steven Goetsch:

Sure. It is tenacity, I mean you use the word grit, right, that's an older word and of course, you know, you'll be in academia, resilience right is kind of up that same alley. Yes, multiple moves, deployments. I'll give you, for instance, I got a deployment and I took it and it sounded exciting and I was going to go there and teach communications to Afghan National Army soldiers and I was with a team, we met at a different base to train together which is fantastic because it gave us a chance to kind of meld together. There were five of us.

A week before I was set to leave, fantastic shape, I had all my training complete, weapons qualifications, I got hit by a car. I was running on our installation, got hit by a car and my team left and I was back home and went and rehabbed and I missed about seven weeks of my deployment. I followed on after them and we finished up together and I came home in 2010. I got a chance to go to a multinational exercise with the French in Europe and I got a phone call saying that I was going to get deployed to Afghanistan again. I barely got home and they were gonna send me off again. So I got prepared for that and they

canceled that on me, and then after that, I got a short-notice assignment to Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana.

All of this stuff happened in a period of about five months, you know, you're talking about selling a home and you have a new job and you don't know where you're gonna live, and I have to prep my wife. My wife is a German National, she's been living now in the states, I think now since 2005, you know, it's not just me, now I obviously think about her.

So you have to be in that mindset all the time to almost [be], I don't want to say robot because we're obviously humans, they have feelings and emotions and you just don't shelf those, but you have to be logical because you have to keep moving forward, rationalizing those things, and when you throw school in there, sometimes that seems to be like an extra thing. Especially since it's not directly involved with your employment or your family. If things get a little crazy, school's the kind of thing that you can kind of shelf and say, "maybe I'll take a break for a semester, in two semesters."

One of the things I would say is, I think that's appropriate, but that's also a trap and I think especially from veterans that I've talked to because I had actually a barbecue when I finished my master's program, and everybody gave me an attaboy and it was good. And, you know, the discussion turned to education and school, and there were some who said "I want to go back" and I started to hear that over and over again. So I think it's very common, especially for a military population, they're excited, it's new beginnings, right, I mean you were a civilian, but depending on how long you were in and you're a civilian again. So I think when they come back, they get a little overwhelmed, start school, find out it's a little bit too much to deal with getting set up, and so they pull that back.

And I say yes, that's appropriate for the fact that you want to maximize your education and you can't do that with that chaos and that clutter, but, as I said, the trap comes when you have to actively work on sorting that clutter and building the grits and the resilience so that you can tackle school because the years, they go, they come, and they go, and they come, and they go, you know, and such it was in my case.

Elaine Johannes:

As your instructor, advisor, professor, I couldn't compliment you all the time because that wasn't appropriate, but now since all this is over when I hear your story at the beginning and all of the changes--and I didn't know you had the accident, I didn't know that--but then at the very end you were so calm when the laptop died and I know for the people listening, they may go "what? What was that?"

Steve, I saw you persist, persevere, continue on, and never freak out and then at the very last at the semester you're to be finishing defending your capstone and your laptop died and I thought, "most students would freak out," no, not Steve, no. So the grit I saw in you, in both areas, the grit of life and caring for people and caring for veterans, and then also grit and just getting the course work done, just get it done, and you did.

And so compliments, compliments especially now, because I know that you're in a position of very important connection and communication with veterans who need communication, need to know what the heck's going on, and need health care and your capstone was around that, your capstone for finishing that master's degree was around access to communication and appropriate communication.

Steve Goetsch:

Yes, you know, you see with the amount of questions that I get delivered to me, I know we're not doing everything that we need to, right, so the proof's in the pudding. And I know, obviously, nothing is perfect, but I know there's such a huge stride that we can make to get that information out.

So they originally, they just passed the Mission Act in 2019, it went into action on June 6th, I believe in 2019, that enables if there are no appointments available, that they can go out and seek community services.

Kathryn Harth:

I'm going to interrupt to tell you a little more about the MISSION Act. MISSION stands for Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks. When it launched on June 6, 2019, it was the end of the Veterans Choice Program and established a new Veterans Community Care Program. Something interesting I learned is that the VA serves approximately 9 million enrolled Veterans at over 1200 healthcare facilities around the country every year.

Steve Goetsch:

In my position as a communicator, I knew that there was a huge gap between patients' knowledge of what was available to them, and truly what this whole program was about, and so I got to thinking, we need to really change how we're doing business and the capstone was [asking] how can we take advantage.

In every community the state runs in some of their largest cities like us here in Texas, San Antonio, Dallas, Houston like TexVet is a resource page for veterans to go and work with some of these community providers, mostly mental health, but there are some specialty services that you can get through there. Some of them are pro bono, but some of them you just needed a referral.

I was on several committees and I couldn't believe that nobody knew each other, but yet we are all serving veterans and I thought, "wow, is there something interesting going on here," I mean, honestly, if I could have a hundred thousand dollars in research funds and a whole bunch of research, I mean, I can guarantee you that I could probably improve how care is delivered.

Elaine Johannes:

The final part of this capstone is an initiative, a program, a campaign, it's a hypothetical effort that usually the student writes about. His is anchored in reality, his is anchored in the real experience that veterans who move from DOD military health care to the civilian setting and how did they make the transition in a very thoughtful and meaningful, and beneficial way. So the capstone was the program that Steve designed that now we're hearing if he only had a hundred thousand dollars and some staff he can implement, let's get that done.

Steve Goetsch:

Well, in a portion of that too, was- so my office is the first door off the main entrance, so if they're lost, they're late for an appointment, or something, a lot of those folks kind of veer into my office, even though I'm at communications, we leave our door open and I've always committed myself. So I don't care what I have going on, if I have that patient in front of me, I get up, I'll take them sometimes even downstairs to the elevators to get them to their appointment, and it helps more than those people because if he gets lost and he's 15 minutes late, he backs the whole system up for every appointment for the rest of the day.

So, I mean, I look at it as I'm not even helping one person, maybe five or six more, but to get the providers involved, they're in a great position when they hear and interact with these patients in a

longer period of time to know what kind of needs, and there might be some program- we have equine therapy, we don't offer that, but if some guy rattles on that he misses his horses and he loves his horses and, you know, that you're giving him a referral for depressive disorder and you're going to go and give him an appointment for that, heck, if he goes and does a couple of sessions of equine therapy, he might not even need that appointment anymore.

Training them and then collaborating with our community partners, I think is huge, we can make huge gains by doing those two things, and we're in the middle, we're in the position in public affairs to do that. So I see us as facilitators for those two processes and that's why I came up with that as a capstone idea.

Elaine Johannes:

So, I'm sitting here, I have a big smile on my face because, Kathryn, you'll need to interview Steve a few years from now because he's going to get that grant, he's going to get this done.

Steve Goetsch:

What they're going to do, is they're going to ask me to move to Washington, D.C.

Elaine Johannes:

I'll vote for you.

Kathryn Harth:

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Elaine Johannes:

So how is it going? Have you been able to implement parts of your capstone in the real world?

Steve Goetsch:

Not yet because of COVID. So I ended up getting sick myself, and I was really out of the loop. I was very thankful to my organization, obviously, we have a hospital. I do have some leads and I had a meeting with someone in a veteran experience office, and I think they have a lot of great resources. So I have a passion and now a good background on what [to do] to treat the symptom of the frustration of not knowing what your health care entails, what you're entitled to, what's available to you, why is it not available, asking the right questions, I can bring that to them.

So I actually had one meeting with our Veteran Experience office, they've got folks and they've got a good budget. So if we're going to be able to because my office is very small but it's about partnerships, right, so we can convene a committee doing some outreach, all that stuff takes time and funds, so I'm excited to kind of pursue that on a smaller scale at our organization and see if we can take it nationally.

What I do like about the VA is they're constantly trying to do better. Secretary Wilkie, he's constantly trying to up the game for veterans. One of the things that I talked about was really quality of communication as well. So for instance, we have a kind of a self-help webpage and that might be fine, I think, for a 30-something, but I think it's up to me to find out through maybe a short interview or telephone call what's this gentleman or gentlelady's level of aptitude for computers and technology. Do you even have a smartphone? Some people might only have a landline. So I have to take all that into consideration and I'll be remiss if I just gave them a link to get on a computer when let's say they didn't have access.

So yeah, all that stuff, there's so much room for improvement I almost sometimes go, "I wish I had 40 hours in the day," I really do.

Elaine Johannes:

Well that kind of technology work and skill, you saw that that's really what is important for students who are trying to navigate an online bachelor's, master's, Ph.D. You have your masters in an online degree.

You signed up early on in the Family and Community Services Master's Degree, which is fairly new to all of the campuses and you took coursework at K-State and Oklahoma State and Missouri and, boy... So when you started the program you were one of the first ones in Family and Community Services. Why did you pick it?

Steve Goetsch:

It's funny, too, because I always thought that tied to me getting hit by a car. So I, for the longest time, I think it was about 2010, right after I came back from Afghanistan, I had a massive pain in my hip and so I went in and they told me it was from my back and we went back and forth and I tried to get second and third opinions and, finally, got an MRI and I tore the labrum in my hip. I was going to separate because I didn't accept the appointment to Barksdale I mentioned earlier, to Louisiana, so I wanted to extend my enlistment.

I wasn't going to accept them, I just wanted to extend my time and service so I could be taken care of medically because I felt they spent about 18 months on me with an improper diagnosis. And I was envisioning me separating from the service, getting hired somewhere and then shaking hands and saying, "oh, by the way, I need eight weeks off to rehab." I'd rather do that if I was an Air Force member.

So, there's some rules about that and I talked with a whole bunch of folks and there's a special physician that is in charge of medical separations, and we had a big conference call and on February 27th of 2012, he said, "if you can walk to your out-processing appointments, you are gone." Meaning, I had to retire.

On March 1st, I was out the door. So I had basically 48 hours after a 22-year career to prepare myself and I was not prepared. That was on a Friday and Monday I show up, I'm now Mr. Goetsch, I'm not Sergeant Goetsch anymore, so now I'm home. A little bit of fun, right? I do not have to shave today, I can wear whatever I want, I can go to the store at three in the afternoon, it doesn't matter. I'm "mister" now, I'm a civilian, a retiree, and then it was weird because once again going back to grits, I thought I had it. I mean, if you want to say level 100, I had level 100 grit.

I noticed I was kind of getting in that groove where [I thought] "why doesn't anybody want me? I'm smart, I'm an Air Force guy, I just finished my undergraduate degree and things have changed." I was in for 22 years, I spent 15 years out of this country, I was in Europe and in Asia for that long. So things kept

moving here and I come back just to new trends. I was doing resume after resume after resume and I actually started to get, I wouldn't say depressed, but just in this real bad funk and I said "I need stimulation, I need to get back into school," and I didn't want that time frame to grow.

So I started looking and I had a variance, obviously, in public affairs, communications is what I finished my career with, but I also was an electrician and worked in control systems. And it's kind of funny because I don't remember how I stumbled across it, I think I typed in "Family and Community Services," thinking I was going to go on base and see if there were any schools advertised and I think that Google hit that. So I started reading the flyer for GPIDEA and I thought, "that's my life, it is my life right now," like that's my plan, that's my end state, working like in either army family community services, or airmen and family readiness center.

So I saw this and then I saw the concept. I like going to different schools. I like traveling the world, it's in my DNA. So I was all in. I think I could really do a lot of good things.

Elaine Johannes:

One of the things that I admire is how students also enjoyed having you in their classes. I mean, you had students who came right out of a bachelor's degree without the world experience and without the grit, maybe, that you have built and you were able to show and that's the benefit, I think, of an online class that's worldwide. From that, were there any particular classes or experiences of students that you thought you were part of their team, that you were actually probably benefiting them, mentoring them?

Steve Goetsch:

Yeah, you know, it's pretty good, I was actually taken aback because I don't have children so I have four-legged ones, I have five cats now, we had two living at the time. I treat them like children, they cried to me because I spoiled them and my wife says it's my fault.

Some of these students had such large families and I guess I almost used it as a form of strength to go, how do they carve out time? It's amazing. I was always admiring my fellow students who have these families and some of them even special needs families. Which, I mean, obviously amplifies the time and the need.

The first week was always the best, finding that common "oh I'm stationed in-" "well, I'm stationed in Wyoming" and, you know, you kind of go offline and talk to them about that, I think it's just better. One thing I didn't get to do was like really any group projects and I think when you kind of make that bond, I just think those projects go better. I just, I've always been in awe of folks that not only are balancing work, education, and now family. The diversity, now I'm used to that, obviously, I've lived in five countries.

Elaine Johannes:

Now, I need to ask before we wind up, I need to ask, what were the tough parts? What was the good, the bad, the ugly, but then what would you recommend for students who are coming in after you now?

Steve Goetsch:

Sure, literally just [being] proactive about your health and being responsible and accountable to yourself, and that includes self-care and mindfulness, and even if you're not in a tough position. Let's say you're a surgeon or a counselor and, you know, there's that term that comes up so many times: "self-care" because you don't want to get burnout. Students should be thrown in there as well.

Everyone's experience is different, I will say I could not have done this without you, Elaine, but it was on me that I didn't engage you more and that is my stubbornness. As an electrician, I would sit there for an extra two hours trying to figure out or troubleshoot. All I had to do was call on a radio for some guy, he could probably have fixed it in 10 minutes, but I sat there bumping my head against the wall because something in my brain said, "the only way I'm learning this is if I figure it out myself."

I would say for the students, even if you are having trouble with an assignment and there's somebody that you think you relate to in one of your classes, reach out to that person. It doesn't always have to involve the entire class, you know, and say "hey, I thought I got it, but now I got into this paper and I kind of got it all scrambled, and can I bump a couple of things off of you?" It's okay, you know, to work with your peers. I don't think I did that enough but I would say you steered me in the right direction and that's all you need once in a while.

Elaine Johannes:

We enjoy learning from our students and honestly, I learned so much as we were working at the end of the degree and working together. So, Steve, what's the next thing for Steve? What are you doing next?

Steve Goetsch:

I'm still working hard during this COVID thing. Obviously, our demand is even more even for 400-500 employees, they have communication needs, they want to know what's going on. Is it safe? You see those media reports. We have all that stuff and, basically, our office is that hub.

So right now things are clicking along. Long-term, I really really would like to get into the DOD and I want to help the transitioning. It just stuck in me, that transition I had. I thought I had everything figured out. I thought I [was] sitting on my good career. I thought, and I would consider myself, say, a hardliner, you know, pull your bootstraps up kind of guy. I did that probably more often than I should as a superintendent, but I can see, the first 12 months is when we have transition. The first 12 months of suicide, substance abuse, for a reason; your stress level, your comfort zone, and now all of a sudden, it's up here and so family and demands and everything.

I think if the DOD spins that back up, they call it Work-Life Specialist, so it's basically to help you sit down with these families (or it could be just a service member), but the whole family obviously has access to these services and you interview them, counsel them, [you do] financial planning, basically, it's a one-stop-shop and then you set them up with all the basic services. That, I think, is my niche. And then my goal is to retire in Europe. So yeah.

Elaine Johannes:

You may not be done with us yet. Actually, there is a brand new GP IDEA Family Community Services student, she's deployed in Japan. She and I've already talked about what she wants to finish with, what is the capstone, and her study is about how to transition the Navy officer to a civilian workplace and all the issues around that. So when she's ready, may I give her your name and your contact info?

Steve Goetsch:

Absolutely.

Elaine Johannes:

The alum can help coach the student. We've got several coming through and I was kind of hoping that you'd be willing to maybe be part of the group.

Steve Goetsch:
Absolutely.

Elaine Johannes:
I want to thank you, thank you, Steve, so much. Now you be well, you take care of yourself and take care of all the people that you serve.

Steve Goetsch:
I will.

Kathryn Harth:
That's it for this week's show. Special thanks to our guest, Steven Goetsch, and our guest host Dr. Elaine Johannes.

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