

Fresh Start

A veteran and his wife help soldiers find their next calling.

by haley shapley | photography by daniel hennessy



LIKE MANY VETERANS, MIKE HANES STRUGGLED WITH THE transition to civilian life. After eight years of service, including a combat deployment, the former Marine had no job prospects and no clear plans for his future. Then he met Colin Archipley and his wife, Karen, owners of Archi's Acres, a small-scale organic farm about 45 miles north of San Diego. Hanes found understanding in Archipley, a veteran with three tours in Iraq under his belt and whose Veterans Sustainable Agriculture Training (VSAT) program helps his Military peers develop practical real-world skills for their next career.

While Colin was still on active duty, he and Karen purchased a tranquil three-acre property with 200 avocado trees, "not with the intent of being farmers," Archipley says, "but the property was a good piece of land." Before long, Archipley started growing basil, lettuce and kale using sustainable, organic methods and became determined to share the peace he found working the farm



Karen and Colin Archipley (top); Mikes Hanes (above)



Budding entrepreneurs learn new skills as they transition to the civilian job market.

with his fellow veterans. At first it was hands-on agricultural training, but that later evolved into a comprehensive entrepreneurial program for returning vets.


"If you don't find productive employment in that first year, it's a downward spiral," says Archipley. "What happens to a lot of guys when they leave the Military is that they don't feel like they're part of a unit; they don't find something that excites them or complements their Military experience well."

Archi's Acres now offers an intensive six-week course that teaches everything from crop production to how to create a financial statement. At the end, students present a business plan to a panel of potential investors for feedback. "We have a good success record of creating entrepreneurs out of these veterans, and who better to be the next generation of employers?" says Archipley, who's worked with more than 100 vets so far. "That's what we need right now—someone to hire other people."

Indeed, the creation of jobs is as important now as it's ever been. "Over the next few years, the Marine Corps and Army will divest themselves of close to 100,000 troops," says Mike Baker, director of the GEICO Military Team. "Add that to the several million out there looking for a job now and it's going to be a crowded field when these guys get out of the Armed Forces."

Given those statistics, programs like VSAT are vital. "It's admirable and important that there are people out there willing to bring these folks in and teach them a skill set or a new way of doing business," says Baker.

As for Mike Hanes, his time at Archi's Acres helped the former Marine launch his own startup. Today, he has a line of hot sauces available in Whole Foods Market on the west coast and nationally through his website, foragermikes.com. "The program gave me the tools I needed to make my business happen," says Hanes. "Going into that type of environment where you're becoming a nurturer does something huge on a foundational level."

While running a farm and a training program—with plans to branch out nationwide this year—is a big undertaking, Archipley says it's just another way to serve the country he loves. "A small community of people, less than 1 percent of the population, is willing to take the risk and devote themselves to taking up orders from the president," he says. "We get to work with those people on a daily basis. It's another echelon of people, and it's an honor." 

HELPING HANDS

SEVERAL PROGRAMS ACROSS AMERICA OFFER EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE TO VETERANS

WARRIORS TO WORK

Aimed at aiding service members injured since 2003, the Wounded Warrior Project™ (WWP) has a Warriors to Work program that provides career counseling services, a website with jobs posted and résumé help. Read about GEICO's support for WWP in "Home of the Brave" on page m5.

woundedwarriorproject.org

COMBAT BOOTS TO COWBOY BOOTS

This program from the University of Nebraska's Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture helps veterans and their families prepare for careers running farms, ranches and other agricultural businesses.

ncta.unl.edu

ENTREPRENEURSHIP BOOTCAMP FOR VETERANS WITH DISABILITIES (EBV)

The EBV started at Syracuse University and is now available at eight colleges across the country. The emphasis is on helping post-9/11 disabled vets learn practical skills to launch a small business, as well as discover all the resources available to them.

whitman.syr.edu/ebv

HIRING OUR HEROES

This initiative from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has helped more than 10,000 veterans and Military spouses find employment. By the end of 2012, Hiring Our Heroes aims to have hosted more than 400 hiring fairs across the country.

uschamber.com/hiringourheroes

Visit the careers section of GEICO's Military Program page at geico.com/military.