

'They come, They go , They're on deployment'

*Skagit Valley College's Oak Harbor campus has strong connection to NAS Whidbey
Nearly 10 percent of SVC students receive veterans' tuition benefits, most on the Oak Harbor campus*

By AARON BURKHALTER / Staff Writer

OAK HARBOR — U.S. Navy Cmdr. Leslie Lukasik was back in uniform right after Sept. 11, 2001. A reservist, she had already started teaching her fall quarter business classes at the Oak Harbor campus of Skagit Valley College when the Navy called her in for two years of service. She was assigned to an intelligence-gathering team in Hawaii.

Lukasik had just a few days to find teachers to take her classes, and she wanted to make time for her young son's birthday.

"I went home, packed, threw a party for my 6-year-old and left," said Lukasik, whose husband would keep the home fires burning.

It was that quick, but she was on the right campus. The Oak Harbor campus is practically next door to Whidbey Island Naval Air Station where Lukasik is surrounded by active duty military, veterans and reservists like herself.

Lukasik estimated that about one third of the students she teaches each quarter are connected to the military, creating an altogether different environment from the typical college campus.

"They come, they go, they're on deployment. I have students turn in assignments from Japan," she said.

She said in Oak Harbor, the students find a faculty and staff who've been there. Many of them are veterans themselves.

"Many of us have been deployed. We get it, and we want to make this work."

Veterans by the hundreds

Associate Dean of Student Services & Instruction David Paul said there are 529 veterans receiving tuition benefits from the federal government attending Skagit Valley College, most of them on the Oak Harbor Campus. That's nearly 10 percent of the college's total enrollment of about 6,000. He guessed there are many more who are veterans not receiving benefits, active-duty military or reservists, but it's impossible to count.

They come thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, a law passed in 2008 that provides four years of full in-state tuition and an annual stipend for books and supplies.

"They're too good not to take advantage of," said Katie Alderman, 24, of Oak Harbor, about the benefits.

Lukasik said veterans need that extra education. Military training is good, but often doesn't apply to a real-world setting. She said veterans with degrees will have an edge over other job candidates because they have the education and work ethic employers want.

"You need additional training to be competitive in this economy," she said.

Alderman is working on her prerequisites to study nursing after spending five years as a Navy mechanic in Florida and Wisconsin.

She works in a student-run office in Oak Harbor dedicated to helping students navigate their benefits and all the required paperwork.

While there, they find other students with similar experiences and a number of staff members who are also veterans.

Clyde Mann, who manages veterans benefits for the Whidbey Island campus, said students appreciate finding an office staffed with people with similar backgrounds. He has several work-study students there, and while it's open to anyone who applies, they've all been veterans so far.

"I think that's why it's really good to have veteran work studies (in the veterans office)," Clyde said.

Paul said that connection and camaraderie extends throughout the campus.

"It's helpful for students because so many of our staff and faculty know the drill," Paul said. "They either served in the military or had a spouse who served in the military."

Strictly Business

Students are scarce during the day on the Whidbey Island campus. Even on a sunny day, the benches and walkways between the campuses three main buildings remain largely empty.

“At Mount Vernon, there’s always groups of young people hanging around,” Mann said. “Here, people go to school and leave.”

Alderman agreed. She stays on campus for her work-study position at the veterans office, but otherwise has to juggle classes, work and time with her fiancé.

“If I’m here, I’m usually in this room,” she said. “This campus is like a business. You go to your class and you leave.”

Lukasik credited a lot of that to the years of rigorous training and work veterans did while on active duty.

“They’re very good at managing their time, and they’re very bottom-line oriented,” Lukasik said.

None of the campuses has a veteran- or military-based club. Mann said the college once had student clubs for veterans, but he said the newest generation isn’t interested.

Danielle Patrick, 25, of Oak Harbor, said she feels more overwhelmed on a college campus than she did in the Navy. She said she doesn’t even connect with the word “veteran.”

“When I think of a vet, I think of those old men,” she said. “I don’t feel like a vet. I just feel like I was doing one thing at one point in my life that was my job.”

A different path

In class, veterans notice a difference between their lives and the lives of the younger students. At 24, Alderman said she feels old next to younger Running Start students still living at home.

She saw young, confident students with lots of opinions about how the world works.

“You guys have no idea,” Alderman said. “You have no idea what you’re in for. It makes me feel old.”

But Lukasik said the range of ages and experiences adds to the richness of the student body. She still holds every student to the same expectations, but they benefit from working together.

“We have a lot of nontraditional students, not just military,” she said. “It’s a real benefit. It just adds so much depth to the classroom.”

Lukasik said the young veterans are natural leaders, and the youngest students gain a lot by working with and talking to people with real-world experiences.

“There’s a leadership tendency there. They work well in groups; there’s a sense of, ‘Let’s get it done,’” Lukasik said. “A lot of it is managing groups, running groups, coming to a successful outcome on a project. They’ve all had to manage groups of petty officers; they’ve all had to deal with budgets; they’ve all had to deal with discipline issues.”