

THE FIELD REPORT

WORKING TOGETHER TO SERVE WISCONSIN'S VETERANS COMMUNITY

Serving up love, one skillet at a time

Kelly Bales was searching for his calling.

After 23 years of military service, Bales was struggling with transitioning back to civilian life and needed something to make the process easier.

For more than two decades, he'd been designated specific tasks, had to meet deadlines and had goals laid out. He was told what to wear daily and felt like his duties had more of a purpose.

"You go from all of that to essentially, what do I do now?" Bales, a U.S. Air Force veteran, said.

Bales worked briefly at the Outagamie County Veterans Service Office, but struggled to find his true motivation. That's until he remembered the hobby he brought with him through deployments across the globe: Culinary skills.

"As I traveled to different countries around the world, one of the things I've enjoyed doing is interacting in the local marketplace," he said. "I'd go into the marketplaces and find the local products and make chocolate chip cookies as an extension of the American culture."

Bales is in the process of starting his own business in the Appleton area. Known as Zkillets, the bakery uses skillets to produce a variety of things. From brownies to Bales' infamous cookie recipe, Zkillets will seek to give customers a delicious treat.

"Our premise is that we're serving up love one skillet at a time," Bales said. "It's about community, fellowship and breaking bread together...my heart really is community and gathering and doing life together."

To learn what it takes to start his own business, Bales enrolled in programming specifically geared toward veteran entrepreneurs at Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton. He credited the Innovation Accelerator for Veterans for helping guide his career and give him a new sense of hope.

The Innovation Accelerator for Veterans is a program that is designed and delivered by the Fox Valley Technical College Venture Center, a startup and small business resource.

"It truly saved my life in the respect that it gave me back purpose, vision, goals, and something to look forward to," Bales said. "This program through Fox Valley Technical College was truly a lifesaver for me."

The Innovation Accelerator for Veterans is a program for startup and small businesses that provides education, training and technical assistance for veterans looking to launch or grow their business. The program is run out of the school's Venture Center, which provides students with the knowledge and resources to be successful.

"Small business owners are the backbone and startups are the engine of our economy," Venture Center Director Amy Pietsch said. "They are responsible for the net new job creation in our country and they are critical to the communities in which they launch and grow."

The programming offers information on how to start a business and develop a business plan. The goal is to connect students to networks while also bringing in guest speakers such as attorneys, accountants and marketing professionals.

"We really connect students to the rest of the ecosystem



and get them going to networking events," Pietsch said. "They all participate in 1 Million Cups Appleton and present their business ideas at that event and get feedback on it. The whole time, they're applying what they're learning to develop their business plans."

In past years, the school has been awarded an entrepreneurship grant from the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs to support its entrepreneurship programming for veterans. Bales said that because of the grant, he was awarded funds to help Zkillets get off the ground.

"There's a lot of work to it and a lot of blood, sweat and tears put into it, but in the end I can say I did it, I pushed through and bam here we are," Bales said. "This program significantly helped me get that energy, drive and hope again that frankly I didn't have. It was truly a lifesaver."

Bales completed the program in the spring and since has devoted much of his time toward researching and refining his business plan. He said that if all goes according to plan, he hopes that Zkillets will launch sometime in the fall.

"Any veteran who has an inkling of an innovative bone in them or has thought, 'I'm tired of working for the man,' even if it's just a glimmer of an idea, go for it," Bales said.

The WDVA is once again accepting applications from eligible nonprofit organizations providing entrepreneurship training, or technical, business or other assistance to veteran entrepreneurs to improve employment outcomes. Applications must be submitted no later than 4 p.m. on July 31 to be considered.

Visit bit.ly/EntrepreneurshipGrant for more information and for application materials.