



Kristina Enriquez

Veterans Giving Back to Their Communities: The Importance of Getting Involved

A Q&A with Kristina Enriquez, Fellow, The Mission Continues

CI: Please tell us about your background.

A: I have been out of the army since 2004, so I came into my fellowship somewhat later than some of the other post-9/11 veterans usually do since I completed my military service a bit earlier. After I got out of the military I moved around a bit and then settled back in Southern California where I'm from and started going back to school – I'm studying kinesiology and nutrition. For a year before I started my fellowship through The Mission Continues I had also been serving as the athletic director for Team Red White and Blue (RWB) in Orange County. Team RWB is an organization that helps veterans transition back to civilian life by connecting them to their communities through physical and social activities. I had been involved in a lot of community work and outreach through Team RWB, and at one point someone said, "Have you heard about the Mission Continues? I think you would be perfect for a fellowship."

CI: Were there specific challenges you experienced, or saw fellow veterans experience, in returning to civilian life and employment? What did you find to be the most significant barriers? How did you decide what to do next?

A: I think the biggest issue with transition is being alone. You get out of the military and it's not easy to connect to other veterans because all of the friends you've made in your unit over however many years you were in the military kind of scatter. Then you get out and, especially when I got out, there was no way to connect to anybody. If you went to the VA, it was mostly a bunch of the older veterans, so that wasn't a way to easily connect to anybody who had served at the same time I did. When you go

back to school, the veterans tend to hide among the masses – nobody really advertises that they are veterans. Once you become a veteran, you don't feel like you're necessarily a part of regular society. So you get out and it's kind of lonely.

Along with that, I think there's a kind of identity crisis that you experience, because you just don't know what to do with yourself. There's a great deal of discipline in the military – I think that's why a lot of people join – and then you get out and you don't really know what's next. It took me a while to decide what to do. Because there weren't a lot of programs available when I left the military, I worked for a while and then I tried school and that didn't work at first, so I came back to California and I took care of my grandma. I was just focused on keeping it all together for about nine years. When I got involved with Team RWB, I started to realize that some of the things I was missing were connecting with other veterans and service. Service was a huge part of my life that I had been missing, so I started getting more involved with the community and I started feeling a lot better.

CI: Please tell us about The Mission Continues and the fellowship program. What about the program made you choose to apply to be a fellow? What appealed to you about it?

A: The Mission Continues is an organization that wants to get veterans out serving in their communities. They have two different programs. One is the fellowship program, which includes six months of not only serving in a local nonprofit organization for twenty hours per week, but also doing a leadership training course. Every month we have assignments that help us reflect on who we are, where we are

going, and our life's goals. The second program is the platoons program, in which veterans who aren't part of the fellowship program or otherwise involved head up service platoons in their communities. They serve in their communities at least twice a month, and also get an opportunity to socialize with each other at the same time.

I decided to apply for the fellowship program first of all because I liked that they were pushing the service aspect. That's really important because that's what we do when we serve in the military, and after we get out, I think veterans need to go back to that to really feel that they belong in civilian society. The other reason I was interested in this program was the leadership training. They seem to really want to develop veterans as leaders in their communities, and I think veterans are perfect for that role.

CI: Where did you do your fellowship? What was your role at the organization, and who were you working with?

A: I did my fellowship at Veterans First Orange County. They are a nonprofit organization that serves the homeless veteran community in Orange County, with many resources around housing and other services. I worked in the employment department there. My job was to help these veterans in transition to find jobs or get training to help them become job-ready in the immediate future.

In terms of the population I was working with there, the majority were older veterans from the Vietnam and Desert Storm eras, but surprisingly there were also veterans in their 20s and 30s who would come in. They were having a hard time transitioning back to civilian life and didn't know where to go or what to do.

CI: Do you think that you could be particularly effective and helpful to other veterans in this role because you are veteran yourself?

A: There's definitely a rapport that veterans develop with each other that other people can't necessarily achieve. In some ways it's about the vernacular you use with one another, but also understanding where someone is coming from is a big deal for veterans.

CI: How has your experience as a fellow affected and/or prepared you for what you will be doing next after your fellowship?

A: Being a kinesiology and nutrition major at school, my goal with my fellowship was to just get more hands-on with veterans who are in need. Eventually I would like to work at the VA helping veterans

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with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries holistically through fitness and nutrition – taking a whole body approach instead of just taking tons of medications to ease whatever ailments they have. So being able to work with veterans who are at that rock-bottom stage gave me a lot of perspective on how I can help veterans in the future. It's really motivated me to continue to be involved in as many veteran-related nonprofits as I can.

CI: As we speak with veterans and supporters for this issue of *Community Investments*, we are hearing a lot about the importance of mission and purpose in what veterans choose to do (in terms of work, school, volunteer service) after returning from service. Has this been an important factor for you, and why?

A: It has been a huge factor, because for the longest time, I really didn't know what I wanted to do, and now I feel like I've rediscovered my purpose. Even though I'm more of a science major, I'm continuing on with the Mission Continues with the platoon program and I'm still involved with Team RWB. I'm considering other things that I can be doing besides just being involved with fitness and nutrition. I want to help lead other veterans and the Mission Continues is really helping to develop that. Not only do they help you find your sense of purpose, but they really believe in you, which I think is important for veterans to feel supported.

CI: In your opinion, what are the advantages of peer-to-peer service or mentoring programs in which veterans assist other veterans? Are there aspects that make these programs unique in terms of what they can offer to both the veterans seeking services and the veterans offering assistance, especially in cross-generational veteran interactions?

A: Even if it's not cross-generational, we all have our own experience in the military, also across different parts of the military. Talking to Marines, for

example, they have a totally different experience than what I had in the military. Some people have been deployed and some people haven't. For me, just being able to help a fellow veteran is hugely rewarding, and in return, there's a lot of perspective that they can offer that I might not have received from anyone else. So I think it's definitely beneficial to both parties.

CI: What advice would you give to returning service members as they figure out what to do next and adjust to civilian life? Are community connections important in easing this transition? Do you think participating in community service can help veterans in this transition between service and civilian life/civilian employment?

A: I absolutely do. I think it's important to find programs that specifically target veterans, so that they can feel more comfortable. I know a lot of people who are recently transitioning back to civilian life find it a little bit harder to immerse themselves in their communities because they just feel out of place, so I think they should definitely find ways to get involved with their communities along with

other veterans. I think it will help them to be around other people who understand them, and then it can also give them that sense of purpose back.

CI: In your opinion, how can communities, educators, elected officials, and/or employers best recognize and support veterans as they return to civilian life?

A: I really think that businesses need to be involved in hiring veterans. I think there's a big stigma that comes with being a veteran, especially for those that are transitioning out of combat situations, but businesses should be aware that we are molded to be leaders. I think that we should be given opportunities to prove that we are leaders in our communities, so hiring veterans is a big deal.

Also, I think just listening to veterans can be incredibly helpful, and getting to know them. Keep in mind that it's not as much about asking veterans a lot of questions as it is about really listening to what they have to say and involving them in the community much as you can. **CI**

The Mission Continues:
<https://www.missioncontinues.org/>