

# The Veterans Upward Bound Project: Battling for a Higher Rung

By Ken Lizotte CMC

At this no-frills graduation ceremony, proud triumph was clearly in the air. Twenty-two adult graduates filed in to occupy their metal seats, lined up before giant floor-to-ceiling windows that peered out on Boston's South Bay. Every onlooker in this large assembly room sensed (or knew) how much these grads had gone through to get themselves here. These were not your typical school daze graduates. These grads had faced down far deeper life challenges than athletic events, proms, frat parties and campus pranks. These graduates of UMass Boston's Veterans Upward Bound Project had literally battled their way to get here, fending off job and marriage pressures, kid-raising, unending bills and taxes, and, for many of those present today, the high risk of getting maimed or killed while on duty in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The academic program they were completing had been no picnic either, of course, as the program's director Barry Brodsky let everyone know as he opened the ceremony: "Since the 1970s, the staff of the Veterans

Upward Bound Project has worked tirelessly to give veterans the very best of an education," he began. "And we have insisted that our students never lower the bar as they labored here, so that they will be able to leave this program, get into a good college and do the work."

To this, Joan Becker, Associate Vice Provost at UMass Boston, where the Upward Bound program is based, added: "It's an honor and a privilege to be here tonight with these graduates, and we have some young children here tonight too. Thank you to all our veterans in the room for making it possible for them to have a safe future." Addressing the soon-to-be-graduates directly, she bolstered Brodsky's words: "You may have wanted to give up along the way. Some days you may not have wanted to come back here to school, some nights it may have felt just too hard. But you didn't give up... this was your time, the beginning of a new time in your life when you invested in you. So with stick-to-itiveness, courage, whatever it took each day to keep going, you



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made sure you kept coming back. You made sure you would be here tonight to graduate."

Decked out in their blue caps and gowns, the graduates soaked up these many kudos while obviously relieved and thankful to have made the grade. But seeds of anxiety lurked inside as well, anticipations and fears about what would be next for them. Graduation meant that now they must climb to a loftier rung, a precarious higher level where they very well might fall. After this, each would

head to a college with presumably tougher academic standards, and, as well, greater mental challenges and, likely, greater emotional challenges too. Could they hack it?

A large white board on a wall in the back of the room listed in large letters where each graduate would be going from here. Colby College was up there, Regis was up there too. A few would be coming right back here to UMass Boston as full-fledged day students, others to community colleges with names like Mass. Bay, Roxbury or Bunker Hill. All shared the same nagging in their ear: wherever they found themselves a few months from this day, the process they had begun here would not get any easier.

Founded in 1970, the Veterans Upward Bound Project aims to “provide a unique opportunity for men and women veterans of all ages to acquire academic skills required for entry into higher education institutions, and/or to acquire the equivalent of a high school diploma.” Classes are offered evenings over two 16-week cycles that span the academic year. Most of its graduates go on to attend good colleges and universities, an opportunity that would otherwise not have been possible but for the specialized instruction, tutoring and pep talks available to them here.

So on this late spring night, with a color guard of vets culled from Vietnam, Korea, WW II and even WW I, the National Anthem played to utmost attention, no ballgame whoops breaking out before it ended.

Here the Anthem was listened to, respected, had meaning. Though a sumptuous catered buffet lay on long tables on a mezzanine above, no one cared about that right now. Though these festivities would work up everyone’s appetites, first came full attention to flag, country and graduates.

Keynote speaker Fred Green quickly ramped up the focus. “As veterans, because of your time in the service, you have discipline, structure,” he pointed out. “You’re ahead of the game in that way, you have advantages over students younger than you are who are less structured than you are. But it’s still not gonna be easy as you head into college life. You gotta have a system there, you have to let yourself get away by yourself at times, go some place where you can study and think... Always work one assignment ahead... Always prepare for next week, not just for this week, so that if some crisis comes up in your life and you miss the chance to study for that week, you’re ahead of the ballgame.”

Fred’s advice drew from personal experience. Today the Executive Director of the CEO Club of Boston, and formerly a very young CEO at a major insurance firm (age 38), in earlier years he had spent much growing-up time in the merchant marines, serving two tours of duty in Vietnam, plus missions to Malaysia, Africa, Europe and South America. His father had made him do it. “Back when I was in school, I was the class clown,” he recalled. “I had too much

freedom. I hated studying. All I was good at was chasing girls! My dad took my freedom away by sending me to the Mass Maritime Academy. This was during the Vietnam War, so by taking away my freedom, he gave me structure and introduced seriousness into my life.”

When his merchant marines service ended, Fred faced a too-typical grim choice as a civilian: Drift into a job with no future or commit himself to a profession that might require extra hours of study and sweat to get ahead. As a young finance manager at an insurance firm, he earned a college degree part-time, went on to study for an advanced degree and hunkered down also to attain professional certification. He pursued all these goals while raising a family and holding down his full-time job.

“When I studied for those insurance exams, I had every hour of every day blocked out,” he told the room. “I once blocked out three hours so I could watch a Super Bowl, then it was back to studying right after the game ended. I used to go right to the library after a long day of work to hit the textbooks, then I’d go home about 7:30 PM, have some dinner, then climb the stairs in my house afterward to study some more. Next day it was up at 6 AM and I’d start all over again. Preparation, motivation, planning, discipline... these are the things that will get you to really work toward your goals. You’re in the process of giving yourself something that will have an impact for the rest of your life. So now is the time to buckle down.”

Fred knew exactly what these graduates could expect. He knew too how they needed to think, and what they needed to do, and what they needed to *decide* to do. With help from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he summed the whole thing up: “Great is the art of beginning,” he quoted. “But even greater is the art of ending.” Translation: These graduates’ life challenges were not over with yet.

When Fred sat down, it was time to call the grads up and make it official. Famous quotations were read aloud as each diploma was handed out.

- “Well done is better than well said.” —Ben Franklin
- “Great minds have purpose, others have wishes.” —Washington Irving

- “The great thing is not so much where we are but in what direction we are moving.” —Oliver Wendell Holmes
- “The greatest pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot.” —Walter Baycaot

Some got special awards too, meaning a plaque and extra applause. And on the way back to their seats, diplomas and awards in tow, each seemed noticeably lighter, more erect, glowing with pride. Families and friends, and robust recent vets, and older vets consigned to wheelchairs all beamed and sparkled amid the boisterous camaraderie now enlivening the room.

“I salute you as you embark on the next phase of your journey,” Becker told them, amid a final burst of applause for all the new grads. It was a “next phase” that might prove their most formidable mission yet. But each felt equipped to accomplish it, not with a rifle but with the evidence of their completion of this program that they now held in their hands.