



Veterans and Military Resource Center Opens Its Doors

This year marked the launch of the new Veterans and Military Resource Center or VMRC. The center provides social, educational, recreational, academic and advocacy support services for our veterans and service members and their families. They also receive mentoring and leadership opportunities, transition workshops and coaching.

OCC Veterans & Military Services Coordinator Ryan Luurtsema describes the VMRC, located in the Student Center, as a place “for our military-affiliated students to lounge; seek academic and personal guidance; access an entertainment area to relax and unwind; utilize laptops and computers in the lab; and congregate to coach, motivate or develop friendships.”

A grand opening ceremony — held in February and organized by Luurtsema, with help from student veterans and spouses — featured speeches and the presentation of a POW/MIA Chair dedicated to soldiers who died, were held as prisoners of

war, or are listed as missing in action.

“The POW/MIA Chair, and the creation of the VMRC, is in direct partnership with the Ocean County community members of the American Legion Post 129, Post 329, and the Rolling Thunder Chapter 2 of Toms River,” said Luurtsema, who served in the U.S. Army from 2008-2016, retiring with the rank of Sergeant. “From the donated art and items to the ceremonial flags provided by the American Legion, it truly took a community to develop the center.”

Luurtsema explained that a veteran coordinator and a veterans’ resource center are “beacons of resources, advocacy and mentorship for all military-affiliated students — veterans, active military service members, National Guard members or reservists, and military dependents and beneficiaries. He added that his role is to help ensure academic and personal success for the institution’s military-affiliated students.

“I am a firm believer in what the center is doing, what it has done for

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other students in the past and what it can do in the future,” said student and Navy veteran Pablo Lopez, 43, of Manchester. He started out in the Navy as a torpedoman-mate and finished as a gunner-mate. “I have seen how the center has brought together other people in the military; it allows us to unwind and relieve the pressures of school. Being able to talk to other people who have experienced lives in the military gives us a great sense of connection and camaraderie that most civilians do not understand.

“OCC as a whole has been a great supporter of our Veteran students,” he added.

“Being a part of the VMRC team is one of the greatest blessings,” said Leah-Marie Williams of Barnegat whose husband served in the Army, “I not only have gained a mentor — Mr. Ryan Luurtsema — but he, and the team I have had the privilege to work with, have been there for me through some tough times.”

“The center has become a second home for me, as well as all the military students and their families — a place to get away from the noise and stress at school, and to have a vast amount

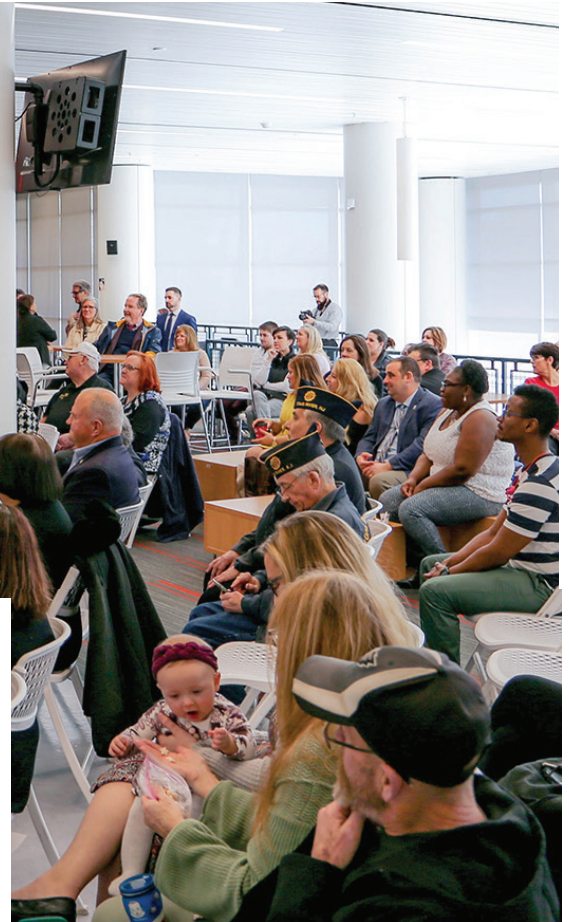
of resources in reach. The workers, and especially Ryan, go above and beyond to help any military student and their family. I’m proud to be a part of the VMRC team.”

Williams and Lopez — both of whom have completed their degrees at OCC — helped organize the grand opening.

“The grand opening was a great event,” said Lopez. “We were only expecting about 50 people to show up and we had over 100 faculty and staff members present and supporting us.”

Williams added, “The success of this event was due to the enthusiasm of the workers as well as Ryan’s leadership skills. Our team loves helping military students and their families along their path to success, so anything aiding with building the center is a great moment. We were finally able to get the word out that we are here; there is support, and guidance.”

“I honestly could not imagine what my life would be like if I didn’t have the VMRC,” Williams added. “When I joined the team, I didn’t know I would become part of a family. I am truly grateful for the VMRC.”



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