



Veterans who are now students at College of the Desert include (from left) Charles A. Medina, business administration; Amanda Lopez, biology/pre-dentistry; and Steven Cuevas, automotive technology. PHOTO SUBMITTED BY COLLEGE OF THE DESERT

COD acts to better serve vets returning from war

By Denise Goolsby

The Desert Sun

PALM DESERT — Veterans returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are enrolling at College of the Desert in record numbers, and school officials are making plans to accommodate their growing ranks.

The COD Foundation recently

launched a campaign to develop a full-service veterans resource center at the Donald and Peggy Cravens Student Services Center.

There are more than 400 veterans now attending classes at the college, said Donni Prince, COD's veterans specialist.

"The number of veterans attending COD has doubled in the past five

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years," she said. "As the military is downsizing, more students are coming. There are no jobs out there, so they're going to school."

The foundation hopes to raise \$450,000 for the project, which includes remodeling a room at the Cravens Center and hiring part-time academic and mental health specialists.

The 1,200-square-foot center is scheduled to open in the fall of 2012.

Big Horn Golf Club Charities—a nonprofit organization established by the golf club in Palm Desert—has donated \$150,000 for the naming rights of the center.

A part-time psychological services counselor will be hired to address mental health issues related to adjusting to college life as well as the stress of returning from combat.

"One of the primary issues facing combat veterans is the social isolation they feel when they return," said Jim Hummer, assistant to the president and executive director of the COD Foundation. "Many veterans have difficulty adjusting to civilian life, much less adjusting to the academic rigor and



Marine Cpl. Noel Arvizu, who served four years, and Army Pfc. Cheryl Cleveland, who served for two years, study at the Veterans Resource Center. CRYSTAL CHATHAM/THE DESERT SUN

social atmosphere of an active college campus."

Prince has worked as a veterans specialist at the college for 33 years and is thrilled to be moving into bigger digs.

There will be room for outside vet services groups, like the VA, to come to the center to talk to the students about benefits.

For example, the Post-9/11 GI Bill provides in-state tuition, a monthly stipend of \$1,578 and money for buying books.

During her tenure at the college, the country's attitude toward vets has changed dramatically, she said.

"I came in at the end of the Vietnam era, in the late '70s," she said. "Those vets

wanted to lay low. They didn't want to admit they were veterans."

"Now the world has become so much more vet-friendly," she said. "It started with the Gulf War when people put yellow ribbons out."

Kathy Moreno, 37, of Cathedral City attended COD on and off between deployments while serving in the Army.

Moreno, who started at the college in 2001 and received her RN degree in 2007, works as an intensive care nurse at John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Indio.

She used the vets center extensively and said her experience was "phenomenal."

"COD is top-notch," she

IF YOU GO

Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band concert

Lt. Dan is the character played by Sinise in the 1994 film "Forrest Gump." Sinise, who plays bass guitar, formed the band and has been traveling on USO tours since 2004. A concert benefiting the College of the Desert veterans program and Public Safety Academy is scheduled for April 12 at the McCallum Theatre. Information: (760) 773-2561

said. "They do everything for us to succeed and finish school. We've always just been in a little cubicle area. It's awesome that they're getting a bigger space."

Tony Mariano, 44, of Palm Desert retired from the Navy after 20 years of service. He started attending COD in January 2010.

"I was new in the area and I came back to school not knowing what to expect," he said.

After graduating from COD this semester, he'll wrap up his studies at a four-year school, where he'll major in business.

"The only reason I'm back in school is the GI Bill," he said. "I had a lot of management experience, but I didn't have a degree. Now I'm getting a degree."

VETERANS RESOURCE CENTER

Services will include:

■ **Veterans specialist:** The current full-time specialist helps students and their families access VA benefits. She also processes VA paperwork and provides information about academic programs and degree requirements.

■ **Academic counselor:** A part-time counselor will be hired to provide academic and career counseling services, develop student education plans, offer study skills and career development workshops, and make referrals to mental health services, as needed.

■ **Mental health specialist:** A part-time psychological services counselor will be hired to address mental health issues related to adjusting to college life, and the stress of returning from combat.

■ **Computer and Internet access:** The center will include four computer stations with Internet access. The computers will have all the necessary software programs to allow students to work on their class assignments, and access email and other online campus resources.

■ **Study/tutorial area:** An area where students can study independently or in small groups. Students can bring their laptops and use the free wireless access to the Internet via the campus Wi-Fi network. Peer tutors will be brought in as needed to assist students with gateway courses, including math and English.

■ **Student lounge:** The lounge area will include comfortable seating and a flat-screen TV. The space will give students the opportunity to talk candidly with fellow veterans and engage in peer-to-peer mentoring activities.

■ **Information:** For the Veterans Affairs Program at COD, Donni Prince, veterans specialist, (760) 773-2536. For the Veterans Center project, Jim Hummer, assistant to the president/COD Foundation executive director, (760) 773-2561.

VETS CENTER FUNDRAISERS

What: The Contender Invitational Golf Tournament

When: March 25-28

Where: Big Horn Golf Club

Information: (760) 773-2468