

# Combat Veteran Finds Community on Campus

## UCI Law Student Drawn by School's Emphasis on Public Service

By NICK IYER

**Jack Williams IV** was a changed man after his service with the **U.S. Marine Corps**.

Williams enlisted after three undistinguished semesters studying journalism at **Mercer University** in Macon, Ga. He served a total of four years, with eight months of that spent in Iraq, where his squad experienced a "close call" with enemy fire about once a month.

Williams made corporal in the Marines. He returned home with a renewed sense of purpose and a drive to succeed—something new for him.



**Austin: vets show up with "eyes wide open"**

"The military instills a strong work ethic," Williams said. "One of the things I learned was that if you don't apply yourself, you end up doing work that isn't rewarding."

He spent two years at **Saddleback College** in Mission Viejo, then finished up his undergraduate work at **University of California, Irvine**.

He's now 26, and a first-year law student who's using the GI Bill to help pay for his studies at UC Irvine's School of Law, with thoughts of practicing in real estate and finance.

The young law school's emphasis on public service drew his interest.

"It's a school that values public service," he said. "They want to instill in people a respect for, and a desire to do, public service."

UCI's law school, now in its fourth year, is admitting a growing number of veterans admit-

ted into its ranks. There are eight vets enrolled in the law school, which has 291 students overall. The roster includes representatives of the Army, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard.

One of the concerns that many veterans have when considering law school is how to adjust to a classroom environment, according to **Janice Austin**, assistant dean of Admissions/Financial Aid.

"That's quite a natural concern," she said. "The only thing that we can say is that law school classes tend to be very rich and robust in terms of the experience that people bring. It makes us more sensitive and makes the other students more sensitive about the experiences that people bring to the classroom."

Williams' sense of community has led him to seek opportunities to help fellow veterans cope with the varying degrees of culture shock and isolation that some feel after returning home from service. He and several other veterans co-founded UCI's chapter of Alpha Psi Omega two years ago. The fraternity is for student veterans and others who are interested in advocating for veteran services and causes.

"The military is sometimes referred to as the biggest fraternity," he said. "The college experience can be socially isolating to veterans. You go from living with people that you've bled for, to essentially being alone. Attending meetings or dinners with the fraternity is a life saver to a



**Williams: returned from tour with Marines in Iraq with new sense of purpose**



lot of those people who otherwise wouldn't have had an outlet."

Alpha Psi Omega also contributes and raises awareness for charitable causes, including the Christopher Compton Fund for Disabled Student Veterans, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to helping returning veterans overcome obstacles in their transition back to civilian life and achieving their educational goals.

Williams also has worked with other student veterans and university administrators to make UCI's Veteran Services Department more robust.

The veterans program on campus initially focused only on benefits processing. It has grown over the past several years, offering community resources and connecting with other departments of the university to assist veterans in their transition to civilian and student life.

An example of inter-department cooperation: UCI's Veteran Services Department worked

with the university's Office of Student Housing to provide guaranteed housing for veteran students.

The school also gives veterans and military students priority registration for classes, and offers a pro bono program. Many of its students have volunteered at Camp Pendleton to work in the **U.S. Marine Corps Joint Legal Assistance Office**. UCI students have drafted legal documents, performed research, and assisted military personnel in a wide range of legal issues, including custody disputes, family law cases, landlord-tenant disputes and home foreclosures.

Many veterans, particularly those who have served overseas, come to UCI's law school "with their eyes wide open," Austin said. "Some of them say, 'We know how the system works, and we want to be involved in it.'"

"I very seldom meet military students who say, 'I want to come to law school, but I really don't know what to do,' she said. "There's definitely a clear sense of purpose."

UCI's law school's relative youth as an institution gives it room to be "student-centered," or responsive to students' needs, "possibly more than other law schools," Austin said. "That allows us to create a culture that supports all of our students, even those with non-traditional backgrounds."

Williams said that the "student-centered culture," coupled with the drive he carries over from his military experience, has helped him thrive at UCI.

"I've known that I would go to law school for awhile now," he said. "I didn't know that I would make it, but I knew I would try."

*Iyer is a freelance contributor to the Orange County Business Journal.*



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