

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

November 21, 2017

NYU Engineering School Launches Startup Incubator for Military Veterans

By Anne Kadet



Former U.S. Marine and founder of Visual Ops, Marvin Avilez, is a participant in the Veterans Future Lab program created by New York University's Tandon School of Engineering. Mr. Avilez's Visual Ops software is being used by Puerto Rico's government to help coordinate food and water distribution. PHOTO: BESS ADLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, Marvin Avilez didn't hesitate: He booked a direct flight down from New York City. While he had no game plan and no place to stay, he hoped the ensuing relief effort might provide the perfect opportunity to deploy Visual Ops, the software he created to coordinate teams and systems.

"I just kind of showed up," he says.

It was an unusually bold move for a software engineer, but Mr. Avilez isn't your typical geek. He's a former Marine—an interrogator and counter intelligence expert who accompanied infantry units on the battlefields of Iraq.

“You’re trained to block out and ignore the things that might hinder you,” he says.

Veterans make great startup leaders. At least, that’s the premise behind a free entrepreneurship training program for U.S. military veterans created by New York University’s Tandon School of Engineering.

Last week, the effort expanded with the opening of a startup incubator for veterans.

Mr. Avilez, a program participant, will move his company into the incubator. But for now, he’s busy in Puerto Rico. The government has adopted Visual Ops to coordinate food and water distribution in nine regional staging areas.

While Mr. Avilez wouldn’t disclose his revenue, as the software is still in test mode, he says he has just entered into a six-month agreement with Puerto Rico to use Visual Ops to track the real-time status of all government departments. He also is in discussions with FEMA.

Such opportunities wouldn’t materialize without his NYU Tandon credentials, Mr. Avilez says. Before connecting with the program, his 14-year stint in the Marines was the only training on his résumé—his formal education ended with high school.

“I could never get a job because I don’t have a degree,” he says. “I know, I’ve tried.”

The incubator space, dubbed the Veterans Future Lab and funded in part with a \$1 million grant from the Empire State Development Corporation with support from Barclays, would be the envy of any tech startup.

Program participants enjoy a rent-free stay in a 4,000-square-foot loft in Brooklyn’s trendy Industry City complex with long communal tables, a conference room, kitchen and a workshop for fabricating prototypes using laser cutters and 3-D printers.

Participants also get pro bono mentoring, design, legal, public relations and marketing assistance from NYU Tandon and area firms.

It almost makes you want to enlist so you can come back and launch your own startup. Except for the whole combat thing.

Many participants served tours in Iraq or Afghanistan. They range from officers with M.B.A.s to enlisted soldiers fresh off the battlefield, says Steven Kuyan, a managing director of NYU Tandon’s Future Labs program.

While some are thinking big, others just want to launch a viable tech business to support themselves and a few employees, he says.

Enterprises founded by participants include TripSafe, a portable security system, and VetPros, which connects consumers with veterans available for odd jobs like cleaning, dog walking and furniture assembly.

While VetPros is generating revenue, TripSafe is no longer operating. Mr. Kuyan says that of the 60-odd veterans who have participated in the 12-week training program during the past several years, about 30% are heading a sales-producing startup; others took jobs with other companies.

This compares favorably with mainstream entrepreneurship training classes, which typically see about 10% of participants launching businesses, he says.

He credits the veterans as much as the program. “They are driven and passionate on their own,” Mr. Kuyan says. “You just have to steer them in the right direction.”

The program’s greatest benefit might be its support for the transition to civilian life, says Tim Lawton, a participant and co-founder of Frontier7, a data-analytics startup that helps companies market their products and services.

Program participants learn to describe their skills and strengths in language that makes sense to civilians, says Mr. Lawton, a West Point grad who served several combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, as both a platoon leader and a ground-force commander.

The program also helps vets deal with culture shock, he says. The military is highly structured, with a clear chain of command. Startups are more egalitarian.

“You may not have people who are legally bound to follow your orders,” he says. “If I get out of the military and have these young college kids working for me, it’s hard to understand. ‘I told you to do this! Why didn’t you do it?’ ”

Mr. Lawton says the startup life, with its unknown unknowns, can be just as challenging as military life, with one major difference: what’s at risk.

“Which I’m happy about,” he says. “Which I’m very happy about.”