

STATEMENT OF
KRISTYL RODRIGUEZ
STUDENT VETERAN ATTENDING BELLUS ACADEMY—POWAY
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENT
AND
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY
ON
A JOINT FIELD HEARING ENTITLED “PROTECTING THOSE WHO PROTECT US: ENSURING THE
SUCCESS OF OUR STUDENT VETERANS.”

April 24, 2019

My name is Kristyl Rodriguez and I appreciate the opportunity to share my story at this hearing. I was born and raised in Queens, NY, but now live in Oceanside, CA. I am a service-disabled Marine veteran. I recently separated from the military last year.

I am currently enrolled at the Bellus Academy campus in Poway, CA. I know this is not a traditional college experience, but that’s exactly what I love about Bellus. I never wanted the traditional college experience. A college degree is not for me.

In fact, I often get frustrated when I hear that veterans, and all students for that matter, must go to a normal university to be successful in life. We should promote other opportunities and paths to success.

I was rarely a great student in a regular classroom. I was more of a hands-on and visual learner. I liked to be creative. When I was a younger, I used to be very focused on the creative arts like drawing and painting. I even cut my own hair. A lot of times, I would feel misunderstood, but when I showed people my work, it would blow them away. In those moments, I felt the most connected.

Sadly, as I entered my teenage years, I tuned out my creativity and became so consumed with wanting to be accepted. I struggled with an identity crisis, drug addiction, destructive behavior, alcoholism and violence. I pretty much looked to anything that numbed me mentally and helped me to escape my current reality.

I remember sitting by myself in the high school cafeteria. I was depressed. I told myself that I needed to take control of my life and fast. That's when I saw the Marine recruiter posted up in a corner. I walked right up to him and asked about joining.

It is funny now thinking about it, because I really didn't know what the Marine Corps was when I was younger. I certainly learned very quickly.

I joined the Marine Corps in 2014, but it took me two years before I could enlist. I kept failing the ASVAB. This is the test required to get into the military. I know that I am smart. I'm just not a great test-taker. Academics, the kind you find in most college classrooms, were never my thing, but I was committed to pursuing this goal. I stuck with it and eventually passed the ASVAB and enlisted at the age of 19.

My first duty station was in Okinawa, Japan. I also did a few months in Korea. It was in a makeshift tent in Korea that I began thinking more about cutting hair and making it into a business.

Every Sunday, a barber would come into this rugged tent where we would workout and do other activities, including getting our haircuts. She would set up on a small table and the Marines would line up. When she left, I would cut my own hair.

One day, a Marine Sergeant came up to me and asked if I cut hair. Of course, I said yes. But I never cut another person's hair, just my own. After I finished giving him a bald fade, which I didn't exactly know what it was at the time, he said it was a great haircut. He asked how much I charged. I had no idea what to say at the time. Eventually, I settled on \$5.

Since he was a Sergeant, he had Marines under him. He would tell other Marines to see me. In that tent in Korea, I began cutting hair for other people besides myself and making a few dollars for it.

In 2018, I decided to leave the Marines. It wasn't an easy decision. I knew I was a very good and successful Marine. I even fast-tracked in rank to Sergeant in just four years. Many people around me encouraged me to reenlist. And I was proud of my service. I still am. But I wanted a new challenge.

When I decided to get out, I immediately asked myself, "What's next?" The answer was always there: cutting hair. And becoming an entrepreneur through this work.

That's when I found Bellus Academy. I did not start at Bellus though. I've been to a community college before and after I joined the Marines. It just wasn't for me. I knew what I wanted to do at this point. After looking at different options for barbering, I found Bellus Academy. It had the look and feel of a top-tier education in the beauty industry.

Also, the staff at Bellus are very knowledgeable about VA benefits. I wasn't sure what to expect when enrolling, but I did not experience challenges in enrolling at Bellus Academy. I was able to get started right away.

I do want you to know that the Bellus Poway campus is great, but it's not perfect. My time in the Marine Corps taught me that everything can be improved, but I feel confident that I can work with the Bellus Academy leadership to make improvements for future students and veterans. Bellus is doing a lot better than other schools. I want to help them be the best and stay the best.

I've been at Bellus Academy for about seven or eight months now. I expect to graduate around August of this year. I like that it is a focused program that will get me on track for my career fast. I eventually want to be in a barber salon that has a more luxury feel to it, and Bellus has that feel.

I am also the proud recipient of the Beauty Changes Lives scholarship. Their mission is to empower the next generation of beauty entrepreneurs, influencers and visionaries. I was happy to be recognized for my creative work and focus in this field.

I even have a target date for starting my next venture: a service-disabled veteran owned business. I want to open my own shop on May 16, 2020. That's my mother's birthday.

Finally, I'd like to close by making a few recommendations on improvements to help future transitioning veterans.

First, the transition assistance program had both positives and negatives. The program overloads veterans with a lot of information. If you don't know what you want to do when you get out, it makes it even more overwhelming. I would recommend simplifying the program but having follow-up options for veterans that want specific information at a later date. Overloading veterans when they get out only makes the transition process, which is already stressful, even more tense.

Second, I would suggest the Department of Veterans Affairs improve their communications with veterans. It should be much easier to connect with someone when there are questions related to the education benefits or any benefits for that matter.

Lastly, I'd like to share with you a challenge I had related to housing benefits. There was a delay in processing for my housing and when I eventually got someone on the phone at VA, they explained that housing allowance was prioritized for those student veterans in immediate need of the benefit. It was kind of odd, because I was burning through my savings and wondering when I would get my housing benefits. But there are also other veterans with no savings likely struggling to pay rent. I had to wait three months while at Bellus Academy for my housing to finally get processed by VA. No veteran should be delayed or prioritized when important benefits like housing are being processed. We should prioritize every veteran and make sure that the timely processing of benefits happens for all veterans.

Thank you for allowing me to testify at this hearing and for the opportunity to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill.