

# The New York Times

TELEVISION

## Jon Stewart, Iraq War Critic, Runs a Program That Helps Veterans Enter TV

By DAVE PHILIPPS MAY 25, 2015

During the surge in Iraq in 2008, Nathan Witmer led an Army scout platoon in a thicket of villages rife with insurgents and roadside bombs. What he really wants to do is direct.

Or maybe write — or produce.

“Anything with movies was always the dream,” said Mr. Witmer, who left active duty in 2010.

Like many troops leaving the military, he was steered instead toward jobs in government agencies that offered preferential hiring or with big corporations that recruited veterans, and he assumed his hope of working in show business would remain only that.

But after selling medical equipment for two years, he had the chance to join a five-week industry boot camp designed to bring young veterans into the television business. To his surprise, it was run by one of the Iraq war’s fiercest critics, Jon Stewart, the longtime host of Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show.”



Nathan Witmer, who served with the Army in Iraq, went through the internship program for veterans at “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart,” now works for the show. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

years — but few land in the entertainment industry, according to the industry group Veterans in Film and Television.

Karen Kraft, a board member of the group, which tries to draw more veterans into the industry, said the small number of military veterans in show business was partly because military service supplanted the years of internships and entry-level jobs often required to establish a beachhead in the industry. The phenomenon may also be connected to a cultural divide that has kept quirky, left-leaning Hollywood and the high-and-tight world of the military from connecting.

“Sometimes people want to apologize for being in the military out here; it’s so misunderstood,” Ms. Kraft, a former soldier who became a producer in Los Angeles, said of Hollywood. “It’s a creative industry, and they tend to see military people as a bunch of rule followers.”

Efforts to bring veterans into the field have included workshops by the Writers Guild of America and projects by big-name producers and directors, among them Bruce Cohen and Judd Apatow, that involve young veterans.



Jon Stewart with veterans who attended a job fair at the studio for “The Daily Show” this month. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

“It was actually inspirational,” said Mr. Witmer, who went on to work at Fox News and then found a job as a “Daily Show” associate field segment producer. “We hear ‘Thank you for your service’ all the time, but here was concrete action, people working to really make a difference. And it changed lives. I’m proof of that.”

“The Daily Show” developed the program over the last three years without publicizing it, but now, because Mr. Stewart is preparing to leave the show, he has taken it into the open, urging other shows to develop their own programs to bring more veterans into the industry.

“This is ready to franchise. Please steal our idea,” Mr. Stewart said in an interview at his Manhattan studio recently. “It isn’t charity. To be good in this business you have to bring in different voices from different places, and we have this wealth of experience that just wasn’t being tapped.”

Veterans are less likely to struggle to find work after war — their unemployment rate has been lower than the comparable civilian rate for

Mr. Stewart may at first seem an unexpected bridge for a Hollywood-military divide. For years the host built his audience by playing straight man to the often absurd truths of the global “war on terror,” serving up scathing satire on American involvement in the Middle East in his longstanding segments “Mess o’Potamia” and “Crisis in Israfighyianonanaq.” At the same time, though, he has been an advocate for troops, visiting the wounded at hospitals, visiting Arlington National Cemetery and in 2011 doing a comedy tour of bases in Afghanistan.

“I knew I had very strong opinions about what we were doing over there, and I wanted to visit the individuals who were part of the effort to gain a perspective on it,” Mr. Stewart said. He added: “Most of all, I realized it was unbelievably hot, nothing but sand. I knew we were nation-building there. I didn’t realize we were nation-building on Mars.”

In 2013, American Corporate Partners, a mentoring nonprofit group, asked Mr. Stewart to take a veteran under his wing and help find that person a job in television, which involved making a few calls.

“Jon said he wanted to help, but wanted to do more than just drop his name,” said Sid Goodfriend, who runs the program.

Instead, the staff of “The Daily Show” developed an intense five-week immersion program to give veterans a crash course in their business, with behind-the-scenes looks at areas including talent booking and editing.

They put out word to veterans’ groups but did not mention that the boot camp was at “The Daily Show,” an attempt to weed out fans and focus instead on veterans who really wanted to work in the industry.

“There are well-worn channels into this industry that are closed off to veterans,” Mr. Stewart said. “You get into the television industry generally by going to certain colleges known for having good television programs, getting internships and getting to know people who work in the industry. A lot of veterans never had that opportunity because they were busy at war. This is a way to give them that chance.”

He added that the veterans he had hired had been assets and “way less whiny” than most of his hires.



Justine Cabulong, a former Marine lieutenant who served in Mongolia and Afghanistan and currently a captain in the Marine Corps Reserve, now warms up the audience before “The Daily Show” begins. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

“The Daily Show” created a program to offer the benefits of an internship — experience and connections — in a form that veterans working full-time jobs could accommodate. Each class of 24 meets once a week in the evening. The program ends with a career fair that has landed a handful of vets jobs in television.

One of them is Justine Cabulong, a former Marine lieutenant who served in Mongolia and Afghanistan and is now a production coordinator at “The Daily Show” — a job that among other things includes a brief comedy routine before the show that warns audience members that if they don’t remain seated and keep their phones turned off, they “will be detained.”

“I feel like the Marines was a good preparation for ‘The Daily Show,’ actually,” she said. “The show is high tempo; it’s pretty chaotic; you have to work together. We might be on the road, not be getting much sleep. But at the same time, it’s not a war zone here. No one is shooting at us. Yes, the printer might have just died, but we can call the printer guy.”