

John Buccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Buccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Dwayne Murray:

To be at the intersection again where I've had some of the most formidable experiences of my life as a student, and then to combine that with the purpose, direction, and motivation that comes from being in the Army, I had to take advantage of this opportunity. It's the only calling for me that was bigger than continuing to serve in the military because I could pay back to my institution. I could pay back to the students that walk these halls. I could pay back some of the things, some of the lessons that I had, I could just share some of the experiences that I've had.

John Buccacino:

Well, our guest on this episode of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast, he is Dwayne Murray, deputy director of the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs, and a proud alumnus of the class of 1997. Now, Murray returned home to his alma mater in June of 2022 to take on this latest career challenge, which perfectly blends his passion for his country with his drive to help veteran and military connected students achieve their goals here at Syracuse University. I promise you Murray is one of the biggest orange supporters you'll ever meet out there. And on this episode, we're going to discuss the profound impact that he and his colleagues with the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs have had on campus and around the world. We'll also get you ready to celebrate 10 years of OVMA. We'll examine where Murray's love for this job came from, where his love for Syracuse University came from, and much more.

Dwayne, thanks for making the time to join us today.

Dwayne Murray:

John, thank you so much for having me.

John Buccacino:

When people think about Syracuse University, one of the first things that pops in their mind is our long and storied history of serving our veterans and our military connected students. This goes back to World War I and then post World War II with the GI Bill when we welcomed home thousands of veterans to come and start their educational journeys through that GI Bill. In your humble opinion, what role does the OVMA play in strengthening that proud tradition?

Dwayne Murray:

Well, John the OVMA starts with being able to provide our veteran military connected students with an opportunity to go through the entire life cycle of being connected to Syracuse University, from recruiting, to application, matriculation, enrollment, student success, providing student success opportunities, immersion trips, job readiness, job placement with our outstanding career services office, and then giving them the opportunity after graduation to bring their time, talents, and treasure back to Syracuse University through our development team, and alumni relations, and all those different places.

But I want to say one thing to really point out our history. As we talk about our history and our connection with veteran and military connected students since World War II, we can go a little further back and we can talk about some of the precursors to the signing and creation of what we now know as the post-9/11 GI bill, things like the Student Army Training Corps, that is the forerunner to Army ROTC.

But even before that, some of my research since I've been here has led me to find a gentleman by the name of William Herbert Johnson, who graduated from the Syracuse University Law School in get this

1903. And he's a Spanish American war veteran, and he comes back and he goes to Syracuse University Law School and graduates in 1903. But there's a fascinating story. Unfortunately, he died in 1965. He was not admitted into the bar after graduation from the law school, to New York State Bar, but he was inducted into the New York State Bar, I believe in 2019. So fascinating story that is really, if there are trailblazers, and if there are groundbreakers, and if there are things that kind of start as an origin story, I think that that's the origin story that's baked into our DNA as a university.

And then as we advance forward, we think about the Student Army training Corps, which is the precursor to Army ROTC that trained Army and Air Force ROTC actually, because we always talk about having the longest continuously running army ROTC program, but also one of the original, I believe 17 Air Force ROTC programs in the nation was started at Syracuse University as well.

And so those two things really start to create this connection to our veteran and military connected student population. And then Chancellor, you now the story of Chancellor Talley being connected and being a writer of what we now know is the post-9/11 GI bill, right? And just having this explosion of connection to veterans and military connected students on campus around circa World War II, and creating this lifelong creation, this lifelong connection to our university and veterans.

John Boccacino:

I want you to paint the picture for us as a living example of, you were in the US army, you serve your country, you go on, you get your degrees here at Syracuse. Tell us exactly, maybe from your personal experiences, the challenges that you faced transitioning from active duty to then trying to go into your higher education career.

Dwayne Murray:

That is actually a great question because I'm still going through that adjustment. This is year number three being separated from the military. And I would point out that my wife Allison is also a veteran having served in the Army for 20 years. And she was actually, my wife points this out, she was the Army ROTC graduate and I was not. And so in our time at Syracuse, she as a student, she had the military connected student experience being an ROTC cadet, and I did not.

I was a student athlete, I was involved in a bunch of other things, but transitioning out the military, everything has been scripted for you for so long. In my case, for 25 years, three months, and two days, where you're going to be for work, what you're going to do, the planning. And while it sounds rigid, there's a lot of autonomy baked into that. There's a lot of critical thinking baked into that.

But there is also some things that I didn't necessarily have to worry about or consider. And even right now, at three years into being out of the military, I have this, the itch. And the itch is, because I've been in the military for so long, every two to three years I move. And that equals about 15 moves that I can think about, packing up my entire house, moving, and changing, and transitioning into another job, still in the same enterprise, but transitioning into another job.

And so there's a little restlessness, there's little anxiety surrounding, well, it's time to go. And in this new phase of life in this chapter, it's not time to go. The thing that we always talk about in the army is when you're in a place and you find out that, you finally realize that you don't like it, it's normally time to go. But the downside to that is when you realize you're in a great organization and you feel like you finally liked it, it's time to go.

And so there was a little bit of imposter syndrome. Am I prepared to make the leap? Am I prepared to make the transition? What am I going to, oh my gosh, what am I going to do next with my life? And the simple answer is, I can do anything I want to do with my life right now. And it's okay to not know. And so there's a lot of things that are very tangible that I had to navigate and still have to navigate like healthcare, like where we're going to live and where we're going to go to school.

And so those things should bring about a certain level of excitement now, but it also brings a certain level of seriousness, of sobering seriousness because this is probably your forever move. This is probably... When you're out of the military, unless you're in some other very unique career field, you don't move around a lot. You may change jobs, you may change careers, but you don't move states over, you don't move to another country. I'm really talking about that piece because you pull your whole family with you if you have a family. I have a wife, I have three kids, and we have to consider all those factors when you move. It was definitely a natural inclination or felt natural to come back to something that I was familiar with and fortunately something that my wife was familiar with, but that's not what everybody else has.

John Boccacino:

And the reason I wanted to bring that up was I feel like it adds another layer of relatability to the students who you interact with, again, as the deputy director of the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs. When I say that title, how would you describe the work you do?

Dwayne Murray:

Yeah, so on behalf of our executive director, Ron Novak, who's our executive director here at the Office of Veteran Military Affairs, who's also an army veteran, I have the opportunity, the privilege to synchronize with all our staff sections, our director of career services, our Office of Veteran Success, job readiness, job career placement. And then I get to work with, I get to do a lot of student success initiatives. I'm always making sure that you're heading in a way that allows you to matriculate and graduate, helping create a sense of community for our veteran and military connected students. And so I'm here to help our students navigate that space.

And we talk about four distinct spaces where we talk about veteran military connected students, veterans like myself who have served before, are currently serving, we have some programs for currently serving students, so reservists, National Guardsmen, those who are here for a special program, and then they may go back out to the force, back out to the military after they graduate, our Army and Air Force ROTC Cadets, our dependents and spouses. And so those are four very distinct, very distinct bins or the very distinct buckets that we're looking to provide support for.

And so we look to create community for all of those [inaudible 00:11:17], all constituencies, and we want to make sure that they understand what it means to be orange, right? That's easy for me to say, right? There's a sense of pride in the connection to being on this campus, and I get to say with a lot of enthusiasm that I've walked these spaces before. I lived in this dorm, I lived on south campus. It's cool, it's unique. It's a one-of-a-kind experience for me. It was a one-of-a-kind experience for me as a student. And now I get to do that all over again as an employee working in this great space, as a first generation college student as well. And so really helping people understand, helping students understand what it's like to be, I understand what it's like to be a first generation college student. And so I can help identify those things and connect them to resources not only so that they can survive, but so that they can grow and thrive in the campus situations.

John Boccacino:

What are some of the most impressive ways you've seen that set us apart from our peers when helping our veterans transition from active duty to higher ed?

Dwayne Murray:

I think the best thing we do is create community. The partnerships we have across campus that we've cultivated as an office, the resiliency that we provide. We actually just stood up an initiative called ORP, the OVMA Resiliency Program, where we have some social work interns that just help provide coordinated care to help identify some of the resources that are on campus, and really to just offer them

up to students as they see fit. And for students to be able to work through some of the issues that they have at a peer level and make it more comfortable for them to talk to folks that have the resources available to them.

I like the idea that we try to be ahead of or anticipate issues that may arise and try to head them off at the pass. So if you're armed with the resources to begin with, and we consistently provide you and present you with the opportunities that can be available for you to thrive, then it's almost like maintenance. If you have a maintenance plan, then you never really have a catastrophic failure. So I think the initiative that we take to provide resources, to provide support, to create community, and to partner is just one of a kind, is first class.

And I would also say the level of leadership that is involved in this endeavor is one of a kind from having an executive director to having a vice chancellor that's also a veteran, vice chancellor, Mike Haynie, and then having a chancellor that really makes this one of his, in supporting veteran, making Syracuse the best place for veterans is really one of his strategic imperatives. And so not only does that trickle down to us, but it also moves laterally in terms of the partnerships that we're able to create, collaborate, and just allow to foster and grow. So I feel like the best is yet to come even in the next 10 years.

John Boccacino:

We love the word forever orange, the phrase forever orange here at Syracuse. And we talk about it for our general student body population, but it's really lived out through the veterans, starting off with the simplified admissions process all the way through the innovative career services, where I was stunned that there's a hundred percent job placement rate for student veterans who participate in this program. What's the secret sauce that gives us this great formula?

Dwayne Murray:

I think it's the intersection of a great team that has been doing this work. Let me say this, they've been doing this work long before I got here. People like Jennifer Pluta and Keith Doss. Jennifer Pluta, by the way, is our director of career services. She's also currently serving in the United States Army. And so the level of care, the level of detail, just knowing, having to walk that space and knowing where, what students need, and how to even be candid enough to ask if we don't know, to ask students and make an assessment.

I think again, it's the combination of the leadership, the people we have in place, but it's also the support that we're able to garner across campus and with other partners on and off campus near and far. And it's like lightning in a bottle. It really is lightning in a bottle. It's an intersection of some great ingredients that we've been able to allow to simmer for the last 10 years, and now it's just awesome.

John Boccacino:

Why was this your dream job?

Dwayne Murray:

Like you said, forever orange, I bleed orange. To be at the intersection again of where I've had some of the most formidable experiences of my life as a student, and then to combine that with the purpose, direction, and motivation that comes from being in the Army, I had to take advantage of this opportunity. It's the only calling for me that was bigger than continuing to serve in the military because I could pay back to my institution, I could pay back to the students that walk these halls. I could pay back some of the things, some of the lessons that I had. I could just share some of the experiences that I've had.

The unique thing about being here and it being a dream job is, like I said, when I walked these halls as a student, when I walked this campus as a student, I was not military connected. And so I have the privilege

of using all my other experiences to focus on our student veterans, our veteran military connected students, but also focus on those students that are not veteran and military connected, and give them a little bit of love too.

And so again, it's pretty neat. It's pretty neat to walk around campus and see folks who were in my major and I understand being in the iSchool and what it's like, or being in sociology, which is part of the Maxwell School and experiencing that, or being a student athlete. And then I get to combine that with being a veteran. Oh my gosh, how is it not a dream job?

John Boccacino:

Was there a moment, like a light bulb moment, if you will, when you realized that this line of work was what you were meant to be doing?

Dwayne Murray:

Yeah, the last three jobs I had in the military, the last two jobs I had in the military rather, were insightful and informative for me. The second to last job I had, I was in recruiting. And I worked out of San Antonio, Texas. And I worked in the fifth recruiting Brigade, which is responsible for a large geographic space, all of Texas, Arizona, all the way up to Colorado, and Wyoming, and Oklahoma, and a very large footprint. And I got to really see what it takes to recruit, to engender people to commit to serving in our military. And so I got some really good recruiting experience.

But then after I left that job, I had the chance to be the professor of military science at Alabama A&M University, which is in HBCU in Huntsville Alabama. And I got to work with some brilliant, talented, awesome students to prepare the next set of leaders to join our military as army officers. And so to go full circle and say, I got a chance to talk to people who were thinking about joining the military and joined, I got a chance to talk to people who were going to be leaders in our military, and now I get to be in a space where they land after service by going to the OVMA.

And so the opportunity to do that again at my alma mater, it meant so much more. So yeah, I think being an ROTC, being an ROTC professor of military science, military science chair at Alabama A&M, commissioning second lieutenants was ultimately the light bulb that turned on.

John Boccacino:

It's time to celebrate. We get 10 years of OVMA coming up during the 2024/25 academic year. How are we going to celebrate and commemorate this occasion?

Dwayne Murray:

It's a year long celebration. It's again, baked into everything we do, but there will also be a very, very interesting event that'll probably take place in the fall to really celebrate and commemorate these 10 years. Our planning team led by Jennifer Pluta is working to put something, put together a fantastic celebration. And it'll be worthy of 10 years of celebrating the Office [inaudible 00:21:03] Military Affairs.

John Boccacino:

This isn't just an on-campus impact, I mean the impact of OVMA goes all around the world. How would you describe that impact that this program has had globally?

Dwayne Murray:

Great question. I would say the sun never sets on the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs, just like it never sets on Syracuse University. We have students all over the world. We have veterans that are serving

and they're either alums or they may be seeking programs, seeking support through our fantastic programs.

Actually, we have close to 60 veterans that are enrolled in our law school. And so there's a Juris Doctorate interactive program, which Syracuse University has one of the very few fully online accredited law program. And so there's an opportunity for veteran military connected students to complete their law degree completely online. So that's just an opportunity. Think about where they can be serving. They could still be currently serving, they could be veterans, but they could be anywhere in the world, to your point, globally earning their degree.

As we send alums who complete our military photojournalism course, some of the folks that participate in that program will go back out to their branch of service and they will continue to serve, and they'll be anywhere in the military inventory. Some of our folks who are finishing the Defense Comptrollership program, which is an intensive fourteen-month program where you earn your MBA and your Masters in public administration through the Maxwell school, they go back out to their civilian agency or back to their military branch of service and continue to serve us as some of our lead financiers, or budgeteers in our military, or in our civilian organizations.

And so that doesn't include the ROTC cadets that we commission every year. Our ROTC programs are at some of the largest enrollment numbers in years. The sun does not set on the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs. And so that's the one way that I think about it.

John Boccacino:

I want you, if you're comfortable, to give us a little history anecdote of, I've heard this story of your love affair with Syracuse really was sparked by a Syracuse University sweatshirt that your grandmother gave you when you were growing up downstate. Can you tell us a little bit about that story?

Dwayne Murray:

Oh, boy. Yeah. So I lived with my grandparents for the first 12 years of my life. And my grandmother got me this Heather Gray sweatshirt, real simple, really nice stitching across. She found it, I believe, at the Salvation Army. And who knew? I would wear this sweatshirt all the time? This is when I was living in New York City, living in the Bronx. And when my grandmother passed away, I believe I might've been nine or 10 years old. It was one of the few things that I still had that I kept, probably because it still fit. All the other clothes don't fit. I got this nice sweatshirt. And I held onto it. And that really sparked my love affair.

I had no idea what Syracuse was, but as I started coming of age, and started watching sports, and started becoming connected to the successes that I hear about at Syracuse University, and then I start to find out the connection, actually as I moved from the Bronx and I moved to a place called White Plains, Westchester County, I go to White Plains High School and I realized, I start to learn the connection between Syracuse University and my high school. Art Monk went to White Plains High School. And now as I lived and breathed, his name is all over the football stadium, still has track records at White Plains High School. And who knew? I used to go to the Art Monk football camp. And people like Ollie Ashe, and then there's just this great... Craig Masback. And there's this great connection to Westchester County and White Plains with Syracuse University.

I have a cousin that was here that played basketball here while I was here by the name of Otis Hill. Yeah, so me and Otis were classmates. And I used to see him play basketball all the time. And there's just this great connection. I think between five and 10 people from my high school would come to Syracuse almost every year. And so we had a cohort of people here, that I might not have been that connected to them when I was in high school, but because we went to Syracuse, we got connected even more. And it all started from this sweatshirt. I actually gave the sweatshirt to a friend that I grew up with who ended up

coming to Syracuse as well. And so this sweatshirt... And now my sons are here. My oldest actually is a senior here now studying forensic science and chemistry.

John Boccacino:

Oh, that is so cool.

Dwayne Murray:

Yeah. And so he's here, but he's not here because he's in Spain this semester.

John Boccacino:

I see, the study abroad, Syracuse-

Dwayne Murray:

Study abroad, right. And so again, he's not just living my dream. I went to London. I studied abroad, and I went to London. And so I went to London. He went to Spain. He called me last week. He said, "Hey dad, I'm going to Mallorca next weekend." Yeah, I went to Mallorca. Oh, yeah. And so, my sons, my six and 10-year-old are at the football games. They've already found their favorite football player on the SU football team. And the fact that my wife is an alum and she's a cheerleader, she was a cheerleader, and she did ROTC. It makes all these connections so, not just easy, but enriching.

So like I started before, it's a labor of love. It's not work. When your purpose aligns with your passion, it's not really work.

John Boccacino:

And I love it. I do want to give a little bit of undergraduate experience for our listeners here, because you had the sociology degree, and you had the information studies degree, and you did run track and field for the orange too. Is it possible to summarize, is there one lesson? Are there one way that your undergraduate experience molded you into the person you are today?

Dwayne Murray:

My junior year, I went to London and I had already, I was pretty much almost done with sociology as a major, but I had this great experience in London. And I took a whole bunch of classes that were in the iSchool. What I learned in that semester was fascinating. I learned about myself more than... I actually learned about myself in London more than I learned probably the other three years I had on campus, in that one semester. And I came back energized, renewed, more purposeful than when I first got here.

And what I would say is, as an undergraduate student, there is opportunity here for you at Syracuse University. And all you have to be willing to do is participate. All you have to be willing to do is take ownership over the space that you're in. You belong here. Regardless of where you come from, if you've decided to come here, you absolutely belong here. And it's a story of opportunity. It's a story of folks not giving up on me. There's so many people that poured into me while I was here, professors, and I had professors that were mentors.

And I remember the dean of the School of Social Work, Dr. William Pollard, and that School of Social Work sat in Brockway Hall. And I remember having meals in the dining facility and then walking to his office, which was right around the corner, the dean of the School of Social Work. And he would just spend time interning me. I wasn't a social work major, he was in the iSchool, I was in Maxwell, and he just took the time to put his arm around me. His family embraced me. One of his sons was a student here at the same time I was. And they just mentored me and coached me through so many different life lessons and situations to the point where I felt, again, when I had the opportunity to come back and give back, I

leaped at it. And they're still here in this space today. So I owe them a debt of gratitude because they became my second family at this university.

And so the one lesson is when you decide to be orange, you are part of the family, you're part of the Orange Nation, you're family, you are welcome.

John Boccacino:

And you have orange all up and down your family tree. And I know you mentioned, I need to give your better half a little bit of love on the podcast here too, your wife, Alison Murray. We need to shine a little bit of light on her, because she also has a really strong military connection and recently got a brand new position at Hendricks Chapel as the assistant dean for student assistance, an incredible career. I think you guys are an example of Orange Love, military passion. We have National Veterans and Military Families Month coming up in November. Just how special has that dynamic been, you two getting to share so much in common?

Dwayne Murray:

Alison is the apple of my eye. She is the object of all my affections. I love her so dearly. And I get so excited about her journey and her opportunity to connect again with Syracuse University because she has her own unique story and journey. She could have did this podcast all by herself. She didn't need to be included in here. She could have her own space. And she's got her own experience that makes this so awesome and so renewing every day. She's a nurse by trade, but she gets to work at Hendricks Chapel. And the Chapel is like a hospital. If you take that same analogy and view the Chapel as a hospital, some folks arrive sick and they don't know that they're sick. And she gets to help diagnose them and give them the type of support and assistance that they need, to again, grow, thrive, be successful, and hopefully feel the same way we feel about being a part of this awesome institution and just being connected to the Orange Nation.

John Boccacino:

It's such a cool connection indeed. And it's great to think that we, again, are just embarking on 10 years of celebrating OVMA's, empowering our student veterans and our military connected community members. It's veterans.syr.edu is the website. You can find out more information about all of the great resources available. We're looking forward to the celebrations.

Dwayne Murray, thank you for making the time, and keep up the best work, my friend.

Dwayne Murray:

Thank you, John. It was a pleasure, and Go Orange.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.