John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Katrina Bradley:

I really, really am very thankful for the veterans group and the different organizations. If I reach out and ask for help in our little group chat or have a problem, somebody's willing to speak up and be, "Oh, here, try this person," or, "Reach out to this person. They can help you with that," or, "I have a few minutes. If you can stop by the lounge, I can meet you in there and help you with that problem." It's such a great community that I seriously don't know what I would've done without the veterans in the group because they've all been helpful in one way or another. We are a community of brothers and sisters, and we've got each other's backs when we need it.

John Boccacino:

Going back to World War II and the GI Bill, Syracuse University has built a reputation as one of the best, most supportive places for veterans amongst all higher education institutions here in the country. And this week on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, we are pleased to feature one of those talented student veterans, Katrina Bradley. Her story encapsulates the university's longstanding commitment to veterans and military-connected students.

In the lead up to Veterans Day, this is sure to be a timely and engaging podcast episode. Katrina happens to be an Air Force veteran who is pursuing a social work degree from the School of Education. She's currently a senior in the School of Ed, and she also is extremely active on campus and is involved with the student veteran organization. In fact, if you've gone to one of the events offered on campus, you've probably seen her. She loves to support our student veteran missions here at Syracuse University.

Katrina, thank you for making the time to join us on the podcast, and more importantly, thank you for your service.

Katrina Bradley:

Oh, you're welcome. It was my pleasure.

John Boccacino:

Tell our audience a little bit about yourself, where you're from, and why you decided to join the Air Force.

Katrina Bradley:

I was born and raised here in Syracuse, so I'm local to the area. I graduated from Jamesville-DeWitt High School and then went straight into the Air Force where I worked on armament systems for the helicopters. I did that for a few years, then came back here where I worked in multiple jobs in the area until I figured out what I wanted to do. I worked in the medical field for over 10 years as a medical assistant. I was also an EMT for the local Rural/Metro for a while till I was injured, and then bounced around a little bit trying to decide what I wanted to do in nursing, and then had an opportunity to become an elevator mechanic. Really enjoyed that job. Did that for about three years until a car accident changed that whole projection of my life, and that's how I ended up at SU.

John Boccacino:

I'm wondering, you mentioned once you graduated from J-D, you headed straight to the Air Force. Was service something that you had always thought about?

Katrina Bradley:

Yes. My great-grandpa served in the military for World War I, and then my grandpa did World War II. My dad served in the Navy, and I also decided I was going to serve as well.

John Boccacino:

What is that idea of service to country? What does that mean to you and how well was that emphasized growing up in that military family?

Katrina Bradley:

Actually, surprisingly, my family didn't talk about military service very often. My grandpa didn't like to talk about it much at all. Even though I asked him about it, he just said, "I didn't do much over there." It was just something he did and he cut the conversation short. And I think it's because he knew I wanted to serve and didn't really want to see me serve because of all the things he saw. I don't know if he just was trying to protect me from that kind of life, that kind of service.

My dad, actually, for the longest time, I didn't even know he served. He was Vietnam era, so obviously what that entailed, he didn't really talk about it much in his service, but he did encourage me to go in. Once I decided I wanted to go in, he did support me 100%. So Navy, Air Force, you're smarter than that. You need to find a job and a branch that'll be right for that so when you get out, you have better options, better opportunities. So he pushed those two branches on me.

John Boccacino:

Then what made the Air Force be the place that you decided was right for you coming out of high school?

Katrina Bradley:

I landed with them partly because the recruiter that I talked to was no nonsense. He didn't try to push other jobs on me. He was open and honest with me. And they weren't going to try to put... I wanted to go in as an MP, even though I scored high on the ASVAB and could have any job I wanted. I actually wanted to be a cop in the military. And he was like, "Okay, if that's what you want to do, that's what we'll get you to do." But as I said, I went armament systems.

John Boccacino:

Sure.

Katrina Bradley:

And that wasn't because of my recruiter. That was actually because of MEPS. One of the guys at MEPS told me I was going to sit around and watch planes rust, and I was like, "Well, that's not what I want to do. I want action. I want excitement. I want travel. I want all that." And so he pushed a book in front of me and was like, "Well, here's some things. Look through this book." And flipping through, I saw the description for armament systems, and I was like, "That sounds fun. That sounds cool." Yeah, both my recruiter and my dad were not happy when I came back from that. Yep, they got me at MEPS.

John Boccacino:

I do not know much about armament systems with the helicopters. Describe that role. What kind of work were you doing?

Katrina Bradley:

I worked on the 50 cals and the Gatling guns or the mini guns, and then that was just basically loading, cleaning, inspecting them onto the helicopters. There was a couple different helicopters I worked on, the 53s and the 60s. I was stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base out in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And it was just constant... Because it was a training base, it was constantly go out there, unload them, reload them with new stuff, and just a constant turnover for the gunners. So it was just a... I don't know how to explain it. You just put in everything you need from the equipment to mount them, mount the gun systems onto the helicopters, to the ammo, because a lot of times we were waiting on ammo, so we'd go do it ourselves, get the ammo loaded onto the aircraft, as well as unloading it, bringing it back, cleaning it, inspecting it, and then doing it all over again.

We also did chaff and flare, which most people probably won't know what that is, but it's what they release to try to confuse the missiles and stuff like that when they're fired in the air, reflections or heat senses to distract from the weapon systems that are fired at the aircraft. So it'll hit them instead of hitting the aircraft. And we'd load those up onto the C-130s on the base. We didn't do too much of that on our base, but we did those on occasion.

John Boccacino:

Once you left the service, you mentioned being a nurse, you mentioned being an elevator mechanic, two very different career opportunities back to back. What was that initial transition like, trying to figure out what you want to do and how you want to live the rest of your life as a civilian?

Katrina Bradley:

When I came home, I was still struggling mentally and emotionally trying to figure out where I belonged. I actually had... The local fire department was looking for volunteers, so I decided to volunteer as an EMT. They paid for my training, and I got my old job back at local gas station. So at night, I worked the overnight shift, studying for my EMT, working there, and then started working for Rural/Metro shortly after that. I really enjoyed helping others and was like, "Okay, I think this is where I'm meant to be is giving back, helping others." So I pursued that until I was injured there, and I had to wait and go through physical therapy and stuff doing that.

As I was going through physical therapy, I decided to go for medical assistant and get my foot in the door for doctor's offices because EMT was rough on the body and I was still healing from the shoulder injury. So I went medical assistant, got hired on during my internship at a doctor's office, decided I'd stay there, really liked the place, worked there for 10 years as a medical assistant, really loved where I worked, loved the providers I worked for, and they encouraged me to go for my nursing degree while I was there, and so I decided to pursue that. And in my fourth semester of nursing school, my dad got diagnosed with lung

cancer, so that was a rough go in the fourth semester. I had to take a step back to care for him. I was still going to do it because I was in my fourth semester, so I was still planning on going back, and I decided I'd start back up the following semester, was getting ready to go back.

When I finally got the call for the elevator job, which I applied before... I applied for this job position over 10 years prior when I first met my husband when we were dating. He works for elevators. And they had the thing, Helmets to Hardhats. I don't know if you're familiar with that program. So I first applied for that over 10 years ago, and I didn't hear anything. So I was like... Well, I finally got the call and I had one day to decide, and it was my final semester of nursing school. I was in the break room, got the phone call, and they were like, "We have an opening. Do you want the thing?" And I was like...

I called my husband and I was like, "They offered me the job, and here I just started the nursing program, the fourth semester. I've been wanting this for the longest time, but my first semester of nursing school, what should I do?" And so I told them, "You know what? I'm going to go for it. I got two years from this date to come back to nursing before I have to start all over, and why not give it a go? Good benefits, good pay, and I know I could probably do the job, and plus I'm with everything that's happened with my dad, and I think I might need a break from it right now." And he's like, "All right, whatever you want to do, I support you." I said, "Okay."

So I took the opportunity and went with it, and I really liked it. I was in it for about I think a little over three years and got into a car accident on the way to work. With that car accident, I now have permanent neck and nerve damage and also lower back issues. I can't lift anything over 20 pounds, I think it is. And so that career is now gone, and that's what brought me back to school. Vocational rehab through the VA approved me for going back to school, and here I am.

John Boccacino:

I get the sense talking with you, Katrina, that you're resilient, you're strong-willed, and you're not going to let a challenge or an obstacle get you down. It could be daunting going back to school, and I know you went to Onondaga Community College before enrolling at Syracuse University. Why did you end up choosing social work in Syracuse? What was that thought process like?

Katrina Bradley:

Originally, I went to... Well, through vocational rehab, you have to take a test to see what areas fit you, what areas you'll be good in. And so there was a few areas that scored high, helping others like social work and things like that. Then there was also cybersecurity was another option for me. Actually, I picked that one first because I had the idea that I wanted to do cybersecurity and help people who have been trafficked, was kind of what I was thinking.

I actually started my semester off with coding and those kind of classes and realized I am not meant for coding, definitely not meant for coding. It was just because of the injuries I had and some of my memory issues and stuff from the concussions and stuff that I've experienced throughout the years, coding was not for me. So after my first semester, I went to my advisor and I sat down and talked to him and I said, "I don't think I can do this. This is just too hard. I don't know how I'm going to make it through." And so we sat and talked for a bit, and he's a social worker as well. He talked to me about other avenues.

As we were talking, he's like, "I can see you as a social worker," or something along those lines. And I was like, "Well, I don't know if I really want to do CPS type of stuff." And he's like, "Oh, they do much more than CPS." And so we started talking more about it, and he's like, "I'm a social worker." I was like, "Oh, you're a social worker?" He's like, "Oh, yes." And so we just talked more about the vast variety of things that they could do, especially at the master's level and license and stuff. And I told him I had always thought about opening up my own nonprofit organization for traumatized youth or a nonprofit for women, primarily veteran females. And he said, "That's a social worker." He

goes, "As a social worker, that would be perfect for you." And I was like, "Oh, I didn't think about that." So the more we talked and looked into it, I decided that that was the best avenue for me.

John Boccacino:

What was it like going back to school? Let's be honest, I mean, you've got a little experience on some of the underclassmen that you're taking the classes with here on campus.

Katrina Bradley:

It's different going back to school as an older adult. At some points, I was even older than the teacher, which that's an eye-opener, let's just say. I remember one class, we had to answer the questions, and you did it on your phone, and then it showed up on the board type of thing. She was asking questions of who thinks they'll be married by the age of 20, I think it was. And I had hid it because I got married in the service young. And she was like, "Somebody's already married in this thing?" I just raised my hand. And I was like, "Yeah, I was married about 20 years ago." And she's like, "Uh-oh." And then who thinks they'll be divorced by such an age? And again, it's me. And it's just like, "This is great," type of thing. Nothing like calling yourself out for being old.

Another teacher wanted us to do a TikTok and post it to his TikTok. And I'm like, "Yeah, I don't do TikToks. I don't even know how to do a TikTok." It's been really entertaining to say the least in some aspects. Then one teacher was like, as I raised my hand to give advice, I guess you can say, or my opinion on something when asked, the teacher actually was like, "Oh, you guys are lucky you have an older student in the class to give another opinion, another way of looking at things." And I was like, "Are you trying to say I'm old in a nice way? I don't know how I feel about this." It's kind of funny sometimes, and I'm like, "Okay, I get it. I'm older." But it's been fun, though. I mean, some cases it's been fun. Other cases it's like, "Oh, I'm too old for this. What am I doing?"

John Boccacino:

How did maybe your time in the Air Force help prepare you or set you up for success when it came to your schoolwork?

Katrina Bradley:

I'd say just the never giving up, the commitment to just giving it your all and your best at all times, integrity and excellence in all that you do. I'd like to think my time management definitely has gotten to do that a lot between family life, school life, everything. My daughter is in so many things after school, and then you got all the commitments of school and assignments and trying to juggle all that. I think if I didn't have the military and having to make sure you know how to juggle everything and priorities, and if you're 15 minutes early, you're on time type of thing, if that wasn't ingrained into us, I don't think I would be making it through some of the things that I have to do for school sometimes because, man, I'd lose my head some days just trying to keep everything straight.

John Boccacino:

What about the support you received from the IVMF and the other veterans themed... We have so many great resources on campus, what kind of vital role did that play in helping you succeed and maybe find community beyond the younger students in your classes?

Katrina Bradley:

I really, really am very thankful for the veterans group and the different organizations that they have. I don't know what I do without all the different... I can't even name the ones that have really helped because

there's just so many different ones. If I reach out and ask for help in our little group chat or have a problem, somebody's willing to speak up and be, "Oh, here, try this person," or, "Reach out to this person. They can help you with that," or, "I have a few minutes. If you can stop by the lounge, I can meet you in there and help you with that problem." It's such a great community that I don't know where I'd be without them. They're so willing to help you out when you need it.

I know, what was it, the second semester here, I felt so lost and I was having such difficulties with my computer, I didn't know what I was going to do. And I had a message on there, I couldn't find my paper. I had somehow I thought deleted it. I was having a mental breakdown. I thought I was done for. I panicked and was writing on the group, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm going to fail." And one of the vets was like, "Meet me in the library. I'll help you. We'll figure this out. Don't worry. I've got you." And met me in the library and we were able to figure it out, found the paper. Thankfully wasn't deleted like I thought, and I was able to pass my class, but I seriously don't know what I would've done without the veterans in the group because they've all been helpful in one way or another. We are a community of brothers and sisters and we've got each other's backs when we need it, which has been phenomenal.

John Boccacino:

It's really encouraging to hear that because we often use, and I even mentioned it during the introduction, that Syracuse praises itself on being one of the best places for veterans, but it really seems like it's not just a tagline. It's something that we fully embody and want to do anything we can to help you achieve your goals. That's really comforting.

Katrina Bradley:

It is. Like I said, I don't know where I'd be without them. I was nervous about coming here because of just how big it was that I'd be alone, especially being a non-traditional student. But I'm very, very happy that I have the support and all the veterans here. I mean, it's been so long since I've been out. I really thought it would be just me. I'd have to do this all by myself. And thankfully, it's not. Anytime I need something, I can reach out to that group and somebody has an answer or is able to help you. And if not, somebody's probably trying to figure it out for you or knows somebody who might have the answer.

John Boccacino:

Given everything you've got going on, I could imagine free time is pretty precious and tough to come by, but yet you still find time to come to the veterans' events, to be involved with the student veteran organization here on campus. What drives that desire of yours to want to be an active student vet here on campus?

Katrina Bradley:

I like helping out the other veterans because they've helped me out. I like giving back as much as I can because it's a brotherhood. I mean, we help each other out the best we can when we can. I mean, I can't make it to all the events because I have the family and other things going on, but I try to make it out to as many as I can. And I know others do the same. We all try to give what we can.

John Boccacino:

What does it mean for you to have your kid be with you when you're at some of these events and see mommy on campus, interacting with her friends, being a part of the campus community?

Katrina Bradley:

She enjoys it. She enjoys getting all the free little trinkets and stuff that she gets to bring home and flutter up everything with.

John Boccacino:

You probably have a lot of orange in the house, I would imagine.

Katrina Bradley:

We do.

John Boccacino:

I'm curious then, Katrina, with you going into your senior year, what are your future plans with your social work degree? I know you had mentioned potentially getting involved with fellow military members who had suffered trauma like you have. Is that something you're thinking about making a career out of once you graduate?

Katrina Bradley:

I am planning to go for my master's and then hopefully get licensed. But yeah, eventually, I do want to start up my own nonprofit organization. I'm still kind of tossing up between whether I want to start up the organization for traumatized youth or for females who have suffered trauma. I'll probably decide that as I get through my master's program, if that's avenue, but I do know I have to do so many years in the field before I can actually become licensed and stuff like that. So I think during that time, I'll end up figuring out which route I want to go, hopefully.

John Boccacino:

What's the biggest lesson you've maybe learned from your School of Education classes with social work that has really cemented, hammered home that this is what you're meant to be doing?

Katrina Bradley:

That we're all human. We all need somebody and we all need that compassion and humanity to take a minute and realize that we all are very similar. We all may look different, act different, but we're all, deep down, pretty similar. We all want pretty much the same thing, to live happy, peaceful lives. We want love, companionship. And if we actually could come together and actually talk to each other, we'd find out that we all are pretty similar and just that we all could use an extra hand, a smile, a extra hello.

John Boccacino:

You just never know what someone's going through, I guess, when you cross paths. And that seems like, again, it's a perfect fit for the social work degree, service to others, giving back to others. When it comes to your fellow veterans who are transitioning from active duty to civilian life, what would be the piece of advice you would offer them if they're thinking about coming to Syracuse, if they want to make that transition, why is Syracuse a good place for them?

Katrina Bradley:

I think if they want to come to Syracuse, really think about what you want degree-wise. If you're a non-traditional student, just make sure you sit down with an advisor to plan the right path for you. You don't take on too much credit-wise. I mean, I've seen people that want to do it all in as little time as they can, but then you miss some of the other things surrounding that. You miss connecting with other veterans. I've seen quite a few veterans in my classes of social work and also in passing of other classes that aren't

in social work that have yet to even step foot into the veterans lounge or the student veteran organization. And they're missing out on a lot of chances to connect with some other vets to get into some of the other activities that we have. And we really do have a great time at our activities and the events we have, and it's a great time to connect with other vets and have a nice group, a nice community.

So when you do have an issue or when you do need some extra help with something, you have those people to reach out to. I wouldn't have been able to make it as far as I am sometimes without them, and I think it's important to reach out to those. I know many of us, when we transition, we don't want anything to do with the military sometimes because of what's happened when we're in, but really, I mean, we're not in anymore. It's not the same. We're veterans now. It's a different kind of community and a different kind of camaraderie. It's nice to have that when you're back in school, because a lot of times the people in your classes, you can't really relate to them. They don't really understand you. Even your teachers don't quite get you sometimes, and it's nice to have other veterans that do get you and do understand your struggles while being back in school.

John Boccacino:

That's really powerful to mention, getting involved with the student veteran organization. Go visit the veteran's lounge, go check out the IVMF, go the facilities, and just really get acquainted because we are here to support our veterans. You made a sacrifice and a service to your country, and that's the least that our university can do to help you as you're pursuing your higher education degree. And I can't wait to see, Katrina Bradley, what you're able to do with this social work degree. Best of luck with all of your studies. Continue to enjoy giving back and being involved on campus. I can't thank you enough for both your service to our country and for making the time to chat with me here on the podcast.

Katrina Bradley:

Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

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.