



# VETERAN ENTREPRENEURS 'COMPASSIONATE SHARK TANK' AWARDS SEED MONEY TO VETERAN-OWNED STARTUPS

By Laura J. Cummings

**AFTER SERVING 20 YEARS** in the U.S. Army, followed by another 10 years living abroad as a personal security officer, Victor Martinez and his retired military wife, Roxana, thought it was time to come “home” to Florida. But what would civilian life be like? What would they do?

Victor knew he wanted to start his own business and hoped to apply the skills he had developed serving in places like Haiti, Afghanistan and Germany, along with being a personal security officer to the CEO of a Swiss pharmaceutical company. He was gravitating toward a home watch business but needed help getting started.

Enter the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program, a state-funded program to help veterans open and operate their own businesses. The program is run locally through Florida Gulf Coast University's Institute for Entrepreneurship. Veterans who are selected for the program receive online and on-campus instruction from FGCU professors and community mentors. The first phase is a self-paced online program, followed by phase two: a series of six on-campus workshops. The final phase applies all that knowledge and challenges the veterans to develop and test their business models. It all culminates in a “Compassionate Shark Tank” experience, where the veterans pitch their businesses to investors.

Martinez was among 20 veterans who participated in the

most recent entrepreneurship training — 11 of whom received funding for their startups. He was awarded \$5,000 of a total \$65,000 granted in seed money, funded by the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation, the Southwest Florida Family Foundation and the Schoen Foundation.

Martinez launched his Estero-based business, Fortress Home Watch Services, in June.

“Being in the security field for so many years, I thought it would be a good fit,” he says. “I enjoy taking care of people. It’s something I knew I could do right. I tend to think of doing the right thing when no one is watching.”

Through connections he made during the entrepreneurship program, Martinez was able to acquire the clients of another home watch business that was closing. The timing turned out to be fortuitous since Hurricane Irma amped up home check requests from absentee property owners.

Other veterans in the entrepreneurship program pitched businesses ranging from a rock climbing gym to a coffee shop to a Christmas tree water-controlling device. Some business plans focused on patriotic causes, such as The Constitution Project pitched by Joseph Cofield — aka. Constitution Joe — a Naples veteran who aims to get the U.S. Constitution into the hands of every fifth grader in the state of Florida.

This was the third year FGCU has offered the program, and a new class of veterans will be admitted in January. FGCU Institute of Entrepreneurship Director Sandra Kauanui said she enjoys watching the transformation when a veteran goes from feeling “lost” in civilian life to having a renewed sense of purpose.

“Many veterans, when they come home, don’t have a clear direction as to what they will do next,” she says. “When they were in the service, they had a purpose and a cause that meant a lot to them — serving our country. When they get home, they are a bit lost because, in comparison, their work does not seem as meaningful.”

Some veterans continue to serve their nation and their fellow veterans through new business ventures. Kauanui recalls a disabled veteran who opened a Cross-Fit Gym in Ave Maria to help himself and others stay positive through fitness. Another disabled vet is being honored by Florida Gov. Rick Scott this month for his business, which is a government contractor for health equipment.

“He goes out of his way to help individuals get medical equipment they need,” Kauanui says. “His desire to be of service does not end even though he is no longer serving in the military.”

The key to entrepreneurship is using your individual background, skills and interests to solve a problem, Martinez learned.

“The whole process was new to me about starting a business,” he says. “I could talk for hours about what I learned. The leadership from FGCU and the mentorship was invaluable — you can’t calculate that. They really want to help the veterans.”



Victor and  
Roxana Martinez