

Summary of Oral History Transcript
Student, Citizen, Soldier: Oral History and Student Veterans

DeSantis, Michael

U.S. Army National Guard Reserves, Sergeant E-5

Interviewer:

Interview conducted by Ms. Katharine Bittenbender, Salem State University, on 12/02/2013.

Summary of transcript:

Michael DeSantis grew up in Malden, Massachusetts, longing to serve as a police officer, firefighter, or member of the military. He felt an obligation to enlist after the 9/11 attacks, but only did so in 2006 when he realized that the window was closing on his opportunity to serve. At age 26 he joined the Army National Guard and was eventually deployed to Afghanistan's Ghazni Province. Desantis describes efforts to build Afghani infrastructure, working with the civilian population, coming under heavy fire, IEDs, and adjustment to civilian life.

Michael DeSantis

Narrator

Katharine Bittenbender

Salem State University

Interviewer

December 2, 2013

at Salem State University

Salem, Massachusetts

Katharine Bittenbender: Good afternoon. Today is December 2, 2013. My name is Katharine Bittenbender, and I'm here with Michael DeSantis. He is a member of the Army National Guard Reserves here in Massachusetts, and he served in Afghanistan from March 2011 to March 2012, and he's agreed to be interviewed for the Student, Citizen and Soldier Oral History Project here at Salem State University. Hi, Mike.

Michael DeSantis: Hello.

KB: So let's talk a little bit about your life early on. Tell me about your childhood.

MD: Okay. I was a kid, typical kid, you know, growing up playing sports. I played football, baseball, loved being out of the house. I was active. Had a lot of friends.

KB: What town did you grow up in?

MD: Malden, Massachusetts, so it was a pretty close-knit community. I was always out of the house. Came from a Catholic family. So—

KB: Cool. Is your family pretty religious? Do you go to church a lot?

MD: Um, no [Bitter and Desantis laugh]. Only for weddings.

KB: Cool. Not on holidays? Christmas, Easter, any of that?

MD: No. I went to a—a Catholic school for nine years, so I think I paid my dues then.

KB: Yeah? [Bitter and Desantis laugh] Do you think you learned a lot there?

MD: Yeah, but that was a long time ago, so I pretty much forgot what I learned there [Binder and Desantis laugh].

KB: What did you want to be when you grew up?

MD: Growing up I wanted either to be in the military, police officer, firefighter, or work with kids at a school, so.

KB: So this has been a long term ambition?

MD: [Nodding] Mmhm.

KB: How did that come about? Why did you want to do that? Any idea?

MD: Just thought it was like—just seeing my friends' parents, like cops, firemen, just—I thought they were cool, so like I thought, “Oh, wow, I want to do that.”

KB: Is anyone in your family serving in any of those capacities?

MD: No, not at the moment. No.

KB: Is there any tradition of military service in your –

MD: Yeah, my grandfather was in, a couple of my uncles were in the military. So.

KB: What combat or what war did they serve in?

MD: My grandfather served in World War II, and his brother was also in World War II, too.

KB: What did they do? I mean, what branch did they serve in?

MD: They were in the Army.

KB: Cool. In Europe? Or?

MD: Yes.

KB: Did they tell you any stories about that?

MD: No, I never asked him. He never talked about it, so—

KB: Yeah, yeah. What led you specifically to join the National Guard?

MD: Well, it was something I've always wanted to do, but after 9/11 I was—it felt like an obligation. And I was getting older, so. I was twenty six when I joined. I felt like if I'm going to do it, now's the time to do it, so I decided to join the National Guard. I chose the National Guard over the Army because the National Guard's one weekend a month. It pays for you to go to school. I felt that it was more beneficial for me.

KB: So were you going to school as soon as you joined?

MD: No. I went to college first, and then got my bachelor's degree in business, and then decided to go into the military—which I probably should have done it vice-versa [Binder and Desantis laugh].

KB: Why?

MD: They would have paid for it, but now they're paying for me to come to Salem State.

KB: Cool. How does your family feel about you joining the military?

MD: They were proud of me. Of course, my mother was a worrying mother like, "Oh, I don't want you to do it, but if it's something that's going to make you happy then." They backed me up a hundred percent, and now they're really proud of me, you know, serving.

KB: Very good. Did your mother have any specific worries?

MD: That I would go overseas and not come back [Binder and Desantis laugh]. That was the biggest worry. I made it home, so.

KB: Good! Did any of your friends from school also sign up, or are you sort of—

MD: Not my close, immediate friends. I just knew like friends growing up, that I wasn't really close with, I mean, that they joined. I would talk about it with them about it when they were in, and they would tell me about it, so I knew a lot about the military before going into it.

KB: Just from talking to them?

MD: Just from talking to them, yup.

KB: That's good. Now, what do your friends, your close friends, think about you being in the military and serving?

MD: They're proud of me, supportive. They like respect the fact that I chose to be in the military, you know, and they're happy for me.

KB: That's good. Did anybody—you mentioned you had a couple of uncles who served?

MD: I did. I really don't know them too well. I just know they're like distant relatives. One was in the Air Force. He was a fighter pilot.

KB: Also World War II?

MD: That I'm not 100% sure. I didn't really get into the family tree.

KB: Yeah, you're right, sometimes they don't want to talk about it.

MD: Mmhm.

KB: So what was it like going into the military after all you'd thought about it?

MD: Well, after I signed up I was like, "Wow, I'm really property of the government now! [Binder and Desantis laugh]. I might as well—I should probably start working out and getting back into shape," but I really didn't have much time to think about it because I did a quick shift. Basically I signed up, and three weeks later I was leaving for basic training.

KB: How long did basic training take?

MD: For me it was two and—almost three months. There's nine weeks of basic training and then you go into your—what's called your MOS. It's your military occupation. It's what you're actually going to go into. And infantry's a two week school, so there's nine weeks, then two weeks of the school, so.

KB: That's almost four months.

MD: Mmhm. It was tough. Got into really good shape. I was in the best shape of my life.

KB: Are you still in that shape?

MD: No! No. That was seven years ago [Binder and Desantis laugh].

KB: So what kind of changes did you have to make when you got there—that was different from real life?

MD: Just a more structured environment. Pretty much everything is planned for you day-to-day. Always being told what to do. You had to rely on others. You couldn't be self-dependent.

KB: Like for example?

MD: Just like every day military tasks, like, you're always with a buddy. They call it the buddy system, and you wouldn't survive in the military without the help of other people around you; so you've got to learn to cope with different cultures, different people from different parts of the country, and that was pretty interesting.

KB: Anything in particular come to your mind when you—

MD: We had a lot of guys from the South, so it was hard communicating with them because of the accents—because they can never understand Boston accents. They thought we were from a different planet (*KB laughs*). Same with us, but it was fun. Got to meet a lot of new people.

KB: That's good. Did they have to make any accommodations for you?

MD: No, no. Everything's on them, so.

KB: Okay. So theoretically, what do you think is the best thing and the worst thing about the National Guard?

MD: The best thing is the camaraderie you make with people. You learn a lot about yourself outside of—I did, from going into the military. It makes you think that if you can't do something well, you actually can do it as long as you try to do something. Makes you more confident. What I don't like about it? It can interfere with your personal life.

KB: How so?

MD: Like my position. I'm a—I'm in a leadership position, so even though I'm not doing the one weekend, I'm not in the military full time. You still do a lot of running around trying to help out your guys, getting them squared away. There's a lot of schools and that can interfere with like work and family life.

KB: These are schools that the National Guard sets up?

MD: Yeah. They'll like send you to schools if you want to go to them.

KB: Like what?

MD: Airborne school where you have to learn to jump out of planes. Air Assault—that's like to teach you how to fight out of helicopters.

KB: Did you do any of that?

MD: No, I didn't do any of that.

KB: You're not going to jump out of planes?

MD: No. I'm good with being on the ground [Binder and Desantis laugh].

KB: So you had to deal a lot with them telling you what to do?

MD: Mmhm.

KB: Did they ever give you any orders that you had to stop and think about? That might have clashed with your personal ethics?

MD: No. They're pretty good about that, if it's—they won't tell you to do something if they won't do it themselves. That's—it's part of the code—being in like a leadership position. And they were pretty lenient with people's cultures, and so I never had that situation.

KB: Can you give an example of maybe a culture that they were sort of lenient with when necessary?

MD: That I don't have any. I never really saw it or witnessed it.

KB: Okay. Worth a try. What is the military attitude towards civilians? People who aren't serving?

MD: My opinion is civilian people do their own thing. We do our own thing. Like they really don't understand what people in the military go through, but for the most part I have a good perspective—like a good feel for the civilian world, so I mean I have no issues with them. They have no issues with us, so.

KB: Sure. It's just—I wondered if it might have changed how you see members of your family who aren't like in combat?

MD: It—you can definitely pick out people who are much more lazy now. So you look at people, and it's like, "Wow, they're pretty lazy." There's like a lot of people—especially from like travelling around the world like in Afghanistan—you see a lot of people that are in really, really bad situations, and then you see civilians here who complain about a line at the store or something. You know? We have that mentality where we can look past the small stuff, so.

KB: Mmm. You have a different perspective on the whole thing?

MD: Mmhm.

KB: Okay, this is more current events. What do you think of the recent policy changes allowing gay people to serve openly and allowing women to serve officially in combat roles?

MD: Well, coming from a combat position, women—if they can handle it, good for them. I personally, no offense, don't think that most women will be able to handle it just because of like the amount of stress put on your body.

KB: Physical stress?

MD: [Nodding] But like same sex? (*shaking head*) Whatever. Whatever makes you happy. I don't care [Binder and Desantis laugh]. This is 2013. It's pretty normal in life today, so should be normal in the military.

KB: Did you ever see any women serving in combat roles, or did you have any gay service members that you knew about?

MD: No gay service members that I knew about. Women, like where I was stationed, we were in a joint operations group. We were joined up with other branches like the navy, and civil affairs units, and they had women. And they would come out on missions with us, and they could—they could hold their own.

KB: Yeah, I've been read—I've been watching on TV. They sometimes bring women especially into zones in the Middle East to deal with women civilians and so forth. I don't know if you've seen any of that?

MD: No.

KB: Okay. Do you think it will have any—will either of those changes have any long term effect on the military?

MD: It definitely will because like they're going to have to accommodate women—like physical activities we do, like physical training. So it might weaken the military a little bit, not like in a bad way, but like physical fitness-wise and stuff. Like they have to make adjustments to like training and so.

KB: Do you think it's going to have a good or bad affect on the ability to—military readiness I guess you'd call it?

MD: Um, I don't think it will have a bad effect, no. As long as everybody's training, doing what they have to do. I mean training's gotten more lenient as the years have gone on, since World War II.

KB: How so?

MD: Not as strict. I mean we were always built on being a very strict environment, and it's become more lenient in some cases.

KB: Can you give me any specific examples?

MD: Like in World War II, they can be physical with you when they're in basic training and stuff, and now you can't be touched or anything.

KB: Interesting. I didn't know that.

MD: [Nodding] They were a lot more tough back then.

KB: (*laughing*) Okay. So let's talk about Afghanistan. What were your experiences over there? Where were you stationed and so forth?

MD: I was stationed in a province called Ghazni in the southeastern part of Afghanistan. We were in a very high combat zone, so. Personally, I don't think we should have been over there. From my perspective, what I saw. I was part of a—we were called Provincial Reconstruction Team, which is—it was Army, Navy, Air Force personnel. We were the security force for the Army and Navy. We were teamed up with Special Forces, Navy SEALs. Which they were going to the public, trying to work with the local government, try to get schools, try to build roads which would get blown up on a daily basis (*KB laughs*). I saw the US government pretty much trying to change their way of life. Like they're building schools for girls. In their society girls don't go to school, so. I mean it was good what they're trying to do, trying to make their way of life better, but you're not going to change someone's way of life when it's been like that for three thousand years.

KB: So you were guarding the people who were building the schools?

MD: We were guarding the people who would like go out and meet with the town leaders, the local government, the Afghani National Police, the Afghani Army. When they were doing their—they're called KLES, Key Leadership Meetings, we would be out in the villages, roaming around, patrolling. If we weren't doing that with them, we were going up into the villages by ourselves, patrolling, so.

KB: You must have come into contact with a lot of local civilians?

MD: We did. Some liked us there; some didn't. Yeah. We got a lot of stuff thrown at us by kids. They really didn't want us there.

KB: Do you think they got that from their parents, or do you think they—

MD: Yeah, it's probably from the—the older folk. They definitely didn't want us there. Like the younger folk, they were more lenient to us being there, so you could definitely tell like the age brackets.

KB: Interesting. Now, was the Taliban active in that area?

MD: Yes, they were. They were very active.

KB: Okay, so you were sort of worried about them?

MD: Mmhm. Yeah, on a daily basis.

KB: Did you ever have any encounters directly with them?

MD: We had encounters with them face to face, but there was not shooting involved. We were shot at a lot, on a daily basis, but if they don't have weapons on them, we can't do anything. So that was the only time we were close up with them, when they didn't have weapons, so we couldn't do anything in those situations. But we're on base, we got shot at on base a lot.

KB: The base itself was under—

MD: Yup. On a daily basis. It was pretty much play dodge ball. You hear the alarm go off, go run to a bunker.

KB: How many times a day did the alarm go off about?

MD: Sometimes one, sometimes twice a day where I was, so it was pretty active.

KB: Sounds like a fun place.

MD: It was a blast [Binder and Desantis laugh].

KB: Now what is your rank and your specialization?

MD: I am an E5; I'm a sergeant. And what I do is I'm in a team leader position. Which in my squad, there's a squad leader, two team leaders, and then on that team I have three guys under me. So my job is to train them to be proficient in everyday soldier tasks, whether it's with their weapon, moving as a squa—like a team, communications, PT. Even in their personal lives, if they have problems, they'll call me, and I can try to give them guidance.

KB: So you're sort of their go-to guy?

MD: Yeah. I'm their adopted dad.

KB: Were they all younger than you? Older?

MD: They're all younger than me. The youngest guy I have—he's twenty years old. The other ones are twenty seven, twenty eight.

KB: How many people total in your squad?

MD: There's—right now there's nine guys in my squad, and then in our platoon there's like forty guys.

KB: Okay. How many tours of duty did you sign up for? I know you're in the reserves so I'm not quite sure—

MD: I've done one tour, and I have a year and a half left, so after that it'll be almost nine years.

KB: Can they reactivate you when they please?

MD: After my eight-year contract is up, no, because you're officially done. But as of right now, if we got called overseas, it's, "Let's go."

KB: Yeah, my father used to say, "They always send the reserves out to be shot at first." So what was life over there like when you weren't actively out patrolling, besides playing dodge ball with munitions?

MD: Just hanging out on the base, working out, maintaining our equipment, making sure that our trucks are ready to go, our weapons are ready to go. If we weren't doing that, wasn't working out, we were in barracks hanging out with the guys playing video games. That's about it. There's really nothing else to do, either work out or hang out and play video games. That's it.

KB: You guys still play poker anymore?

MD: Yeah, they play poker. Yup. I wasn't too into that. I only know how to play Texas Hold-em, and they all like to play games that I didn't know or really care to know, so.

KB: That's interesting. I'm assuming that if you're playing video games then also a lot of your contact with your family was through internet?

MD: Yeah, we had internet, so there's a lot of skypeing. And sometimes the internet was slow, sometimes it wasn't working, so. We had—we were able to communicate to home.

KB: Were there—did you have to sign up for a particular slot to do that?

MD: No, we had to pay for our internet. It was like through a civil contract, so we paid through the civilian contractors that were on the base. There was also cell phones. You could buy a pre-paid cell phone at the—we had what were called bazaars on the base where like locals had their own shops set up, so you can like buy like pre-paid phones. It's a lot different than like Vietnam and World War II where you would get a letter once a month if you were lucky. Now you can talk to people at home on a daily basis.

KB: Is there any kind of censorship going on with that?

MD: There is. I don't know to what extent. I know they probably look for like key words or whatnot, but nothing that I know of.

KB: That's good. A little looser and freer than it used to be then. You said—mentioned there were civilian contractors doing the internet stuff. Were there a lot of civilian contractors on your base?

MD: [Nodding] There was. Like most of the base was civilian contractors. Civilian contractors were—they were either their own security teams, or they would be the contractors that would go out and build the roads, build the schools, work on the base, like the maintenance base, work on the trucks and stuff. The chow hall- that stuff is all contracted out to civilians.

KB: Yeah, they had their own security teams you said?

MD: Yeah, there's private security forces overseas. You can sign up for and go work for them.

KB: Are they completely separate from the military?

MD: They are, yup.

KB: Do they have to follow the same rules of engagement?

MD: Yes, they do. I believe so. I'm not one hundred percent sure.

KB: Cool. Do you stay in touch with the people from your unit, now—

MD: I do, I do. National Guard, we're all from Massachusetts. There's a big group of us. We still talk, we go golfing, hang out, play fantasy football together. We still talk on a daily basis, a lot of us.

KB: Good. Do you think your training over here prepared you adequately for what you experienced over there?

MD: It did. You definitely get into that mental state that, you know, to be able to take anything. At home, like when you train out, we train out for three months specifically for the mission that we're doing. Before we left, we went to Indiana, so you're training every day for your specific mission. We were ready. We knew what we were going to get into over there.

KB: Sometimes when you learn something, then you go out into the field—just in civilian life, and you have to learn all over again.

MD: Exactly.

KB: Was there any of that? Did you feel like any of that was the case?

MD: No. No, not really because we had great training here. So it's different from a toy IED to an actual, real live one. It's different, but—learning the language, that was tough. Just communicating with them over there.

KB: So you learned some words?

MD: We learned some words. I really don't remember much.

KB: Can you give me a few?

MD: Wudrēga (*phonetic*), that means stop. I forget. I forget other words. I don't know. It's been a couple years since we've been over there, so.

KB: So when you were over there, what was your proudest accomplishment?

MD: My proudest accompl—Getting home! Getting all of our guys home. We lost one kid, one guy in my squad, but he left for medical, and he passed away a month after he got home due to cancer.

KB: Ouch.

MD: Yeah. But all forty of our guys, we all got home safe, so that was pretty good.

KB: Congratulations. And what would you change, if you could, about your experience over there?

MD: There's really not much I would change. The guys that I was with were awesome. We'd been training together for like six years, so we were pretty close. I'd kind of like to do a mission over there where we weren't joined up with like Navy or Air Force, just to do our own thing. But other than that, it was—all in all I wouldn't change much.

KB: If you were doing that mission by yourselves, what do you think would be different about it?

MD: We probably would have saw a lot more action than we did. I mean—mission was just to be their security so eighty percent of the time when we were going out, we weren't going out looking for a fight per se. So that's what it was, so.

KB: You mentioned that you encountered real IEDs instead of fake IEDs. Were those fairly common? You mentioned that the road had gotten blown up a lot.

MD: Oh, yeah, they were going off on a daily basis. We were stationed right outside of like the—it's a main road in Afghanistan. They call it Route Ohio. and it's just one big long road for miles and miles, hundreds of miles; and that was getting blown up on a daily basis.

KB: Was this one that the US forces built or the coalition forces built?

MD: Mmhm. The US forces, they built that. The coalition forces built it, too. Just a continuation, I think they're still building it; but yeah, even on like dirt roads, side roads, they were everywhere. You always had to be on the lookout, and they were big.

KB: How big?

MD: In our area they were on an average of two hundred pound IEDs.

KB: That is big. Wow.

MD: [Nodding] Which the trucks we were using, they can disintegrate those. We actually had one of the trucks get blown up. That was a—an interesting scary day, so.

KB: I guess. Was this a utility truck? Or was it a transport?

MD: The which?

KB: The one that you said got blown up.

MD: It was a [*unintelligible*] transport. It was a gun truck. It had weapons on it. We did joint missions with the Polish, too, because we were stationed on a Polish base, so we became kind of close with them. It was one of their vehicles that got blown up. It wasn't ours.

KB: Still. Um, what advice would you give a soldier going over there for their first deployment?

MD: Going over—wow. Trust your training. Trust your leadership. Go over there with an open mind. Just don't forget that. Just make sure that people back home aren't forgetting about him. As long as you trust your training and trust each other, you'll get home safe.

KB: Okay. I'm going to ask you a few opinions. You've already mentioned a couple, but I might go over them. Would you be willing to give your opinion on the War on Terror/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom, and the way it's being waged now?

MD: Uh, okay. My opinion? My personal opinion is that I think it's been a waste of money and a waste of soldier's lives. We shouldn't have been over there.

KB: At all?

MD: (*shaking head*) At all. No. We're trying to change another way of life. I mean that would be like them coming here and try to change the way we live. We got the people that they needed to get, so I think it's time for everyone to come home. Especially the fact that one of the U.S. jobs over there is to train the Afghani police and Afghani Army, and you wouldn't know which one's the Taliban or not cause they'd turn on you in a second; so you can't trust even them. They should just send everybody home [Nodding].

KB: Okay. What do you think about the soldiers on the ground over there?

MD: They're the best soldiers in the world, so.

KB: (*laughing*) Even the Polish?

MD: (*laughing*) I won't get into any Polish jokes, but—but U.S. soldiers? They got the best training, the best equipment, so they know what they're doing over there.

KB: Okay. So what do you think of the politicians, and the way they're behaving as regards the war?

MD: I don't think politicians should be involved in a war. They have no idea what they're talking about. My opinion, they look at it as, "We're America, we can just take over anything we want." And money-wise, I mean, who wasted billions of dollars in a war that—what has it accomplished, you know? I think that they should just stay out of it, and let the military run it.

KB: Mmhm. Okay. What do you think the long term outcome is going to be?

MD: Well, Obama said that they were going to pull everybody out, but now they want to keep troops over there, so I don't know how long that's going to be. They want to keep troops in there to keep training the Afghan police and Afghan Army. I don't know. I think they should just send everybody home. Let them, it's their country. Let them deal with it, you know?

KB: What do you think would happen if they did send everyone home?

MD: As soon as the Americans leave, the Taliban's going right back in. They've said it a hundred times while we were over there. "We're just waiting for everybody to leave, you know." They'll take over the bases; they'll take over everything.

KB: That's depressing.

MD: Yeah.

KB: Okay. How do you think about how the media has reported the war?

MD: Honestly, I don't really pay attention to the media when it comes to the war. They don't report a lot that goes on over there. Like, for instance, soldiers getting killed. When I was over there in September alone, we probably—they're called ramp ceremonies, where fallen soldiers, they send them off, they bring them to the helipads, and they have a big ceremony, send them off. I probably went to—maybe fifteen, and each ceremony there could be more than one soldier, and I would talk to my family at home and ask them have they heard anything? And they would be like, "No, we never heard about soldiers being killed or anything." I think the media doesn't do that because if they keep showing soldiers getting killed, the public's just going to not want the war to continue.

KB: You know, you are of course aware that the Bush administration originally would not allow that kind of reporting, and that that changed later on.

MD: Yeah [Nodding]. I just—I really don't pay attention to the media.

KB: Okay. Did you have any reporters embedded with your unit?

MD: No, I don't remember that we did. I don't think we had any reporters. We might've. I just didn't know that they were there.

KB: Okay. Kept a low profile over there? (*MD nods*) Okay. What would you like civilians here in the U.S. to know about the war?

MD: Just that the soldiers that are over there are fighting for this country. It's because of them that we're where we're at today. Just don't forget about them, constantly honor them, be proud of them.

KB: What do you think of whistleblowers like Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden?

MD: I don't know. I don't really follow them, so.

KB: Okay, so you haven't seen any of the material they made public?

MD: No.

KB: Okay. What was reentry into U.S. civilian life like when you came home?

MD: It was kind of shell shock. I mean we got home—like I was really hesitant to be in groups. I was distant from people, quiet. It was different because over there you know what you're doing on a daily basis; you're structured. Back home it's like, "Okay, what do I do now?" I

wake up; it's ten o'clock in the morning. I'm usually up at like five in the morning. It's like, okay. It was different. It was hard. It takes a while to get back into it, but you have a lot of good people around you. It makes it a lot easier.

KB: Were you already married by that point?

MD: No. I got engaged two months after I got home.

KB: You said you sort of stayed away from groups of people?

MD: Yeah, large groups of people. Just because when you're over there, you're constantly—your head's on a swivel. You're always looking around wondering who's going to come after you, and you bring that home. It's like subconscious. Like you're doing it without even thinking about it. So like large groups of people—but now, I'm pretty good about being in a big group of people.

KB: So how long did that wind down take? For that particular—

MD: I'd say a couple months. Couple months [Nodding], but I still have—like you have trouble sleeping at night. You have like flashbacks, dreams and stuff, I guess.

KB: Do you have those?

MD: Sometimes, yeah. Not as bad as a lot of guys would, but you do. It never leaves your mind—what goes on; what you've been through. So, yeah.

KB: Okay. Did the Army National Guard debrief you at all? Did they give you any instructions during your debriefing?

MD: Coming home? They give you a lot of information on like the VA, Family Readiness programs, lot of information on to reach out for help if you need help, a lot of veteran reps, too, if you didn't have jobs—stuff like that.

KB: That's good. Have you had any kind of contact with the VA since you got back?

MD: I have. I've been there for a couple of medical issues that happened overseas.

KB: Did you feel like you got the kind of service you needed?

MD: The VA, they're kind of slow. If you make an appointment today you might get it two months from now, but, I mean, they're there, so. And if anything that's involved from the war that you're in, it's all free. It's good to know that you can go to them, and they'll eventually help you.

KB: The key word being eventually? So tell me about Salem State's program for returning veterans?

MD: Well, I really don't know much, I'm really not involved in it. The VA reps we have here—they're awesome; they're great. You can call them, ask them a question, they'll help you out right away. I've talked to friends who've gone to other colleges, and their VA reps, they're not as quick to get back to them. But here it's—they call them up, and it's like, "Okay, here's what you have to do." There's a lot of information out there. We get emails all the time for jobs for veterans, so it's really good.

KB: One of the other veterans in one of my classes, he says he's taking special veterans' only English language or English literature classes, and they're all reading about the Odyssey as a group.

MD: Nice.

KB: Yup. What are you currently studying?

MD: I am taking classes to get into the Master's program for school counseling. I'm taking a couple of graduate classes, Abnormal Psychology, Child Growth and Development, and Group Counseling.

KB: What age group do you want to counsel?

MD: I like high school, like eighth grade through high school. I want to help out the high school kids, try to put them on the right path.

KB: Your wife is a teacher?

MD: She is.

KB: What grade does she teach?

MD: She teaches high school Spanish at Beverly High School. She's been there for about ten years, and she likes it.

KB: Did she have any influence on your decision to go into counseling after you came back?

MD: No. She's very supportive of whatever I wanted to do. I've worked with kids. When I went for my undergraduate degree, I got that in business. This was when I had no idea what I wanted to do. I worked with kids at an after-school and summer program for four years, and I loved that. That was the favorite—my best job I ever had.

KB: What did you do with them?

MD: I was a group leader and then acted as a site coordinator in charge of the program. When they got to school, they'd come to us and like do math, sports, activities. Summertime they were with us all day every day. It was like a camp, you know, a camp for kids. A lot of them were from like foster homes, in and out of, so they really didn't have like too many people to

look up to or trust. So that's what we were there for. And that was my favorite time, so why not continue to do it, you know?

KB: Absolutely. What age group was this again?

MD: There was a five to nine and then nine to twelve group.

KB: So get 'em young. (*MD nods*) Well, that's good. Now where am I on my list here? What do you think you'll bring to that from your military experience?

MD: Just hard work. Definitely when I'm talking to kids—notice these days the youth, they're getting kind of—they're slacking a little bit. A lot of them think that everything's handed to them now.

KB: Has it ever been different?

MD: Yeah. And being like a guidance counselor with kids, I can make it, you know—you need to work at stuff in order to succeed in life. Hard work and show them what hard work is, I guess.

KB: Good. When I've seen you in class, because we take a class together, you seem more relaxed speaking with Karen, who's also in the National Guard. Do you find it easier to socialize with other veterans here?

MD: Yes, definitely. Cause you both know what each other's gone through without even knowing their background per se. Just from the training. It's easier, even easier to talk with veterans who were deployed in the same area as you. Like I feel a lot more comfortable talking to fellow veterans than civilians, than even with my friends. They know now not to ask me any questions or anything. But if another veteran did, I'd feel fine talking to them about anything. It's a camaraderie that you build.

KB: Is it just shared experience, or are you afraid that they're going to judge you?

MD: No, they definitely don't judge each other. I mean, a lot of soldiers have seen a lot worse than I have or are a lot worse off. You just respect them. It's an understanding, so you don't—there's no judging.

KB: Sure. I was actually referring to civilians.

MD: Oh, civilians? No, they don't judge. At least the ones I know don't.

KB: I grew up during Vietnam, so things were a little different then. Do you find—what's the most noticeable difference between veteran students and non-veterans?

MD: Commitment to like the work ethics, I guess. Like studying, study-wise. In college, me—undergraduate, I was like a B student. I didn't like to study or anything, but now I'm always studying. I'm more disciplined in that area.

KB: Bs not bad!

MD: No, it's not. I got some Cs, but no. Yeah, you definitely have a better work ethic, I guess.

KB: Do you notice that in general with the veterans versus the non-veterans here?

MD: Um, some. I only know a couple veterans that go here, and I don't really know any of the—not like civilians outside of school, so I don't know how they are outside of school.

KB: Are you on the Continuing Ed program here, or are you going days as well?

MD: Yeah, Continuing Ed, yup. Night classes, but I work fulltime, too.

KB: What do you do?

MD: I am a one-on-one aide at an elementary school in Danvers.

KB: What is that?

MD: I basically work with one student. He's troubled. He's a seven year old with severe anger issues, so he's on an IEP plan (*Individual Education Plan*). He's got a separate classroom with—there's another student in that classroom who has another aide, and then we have three kindergartners who come in throughout the day to work with us. But they call me “the bouncer” at school because wherever he goes, I have to go.

KB: Oh, wow. Does he like you?

MD: He does, he does. And I'm trying to integrate him back into his classroom more. It's very stressful, but it's good. I like it.

KB: You find it satisfying?

MD: Yup.

KB: That's good. That's almost more important. What do you think is the biggest impact in general that military service has had on you as a person?

MD: Definitely my confidence. It's that you can do a lot more than you think you can. Before I joined, I'd be like hesitant. I wasn't as confident. Like going on interviews or working now, it's like okay, I joined. They built this confidence in me. I served overseas; I came home, so you can almost conquer anything. Lot bigger confidence level.

KB: More than you had when you left?

MD: Yup [Nodding].

KB: Well, that's good. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about, rant about, any stories or opinions you want to put into the historic record?

MD: No, I don't think so unless you have any other questions.

KB: No, that was my full thing. Well, thank you very much.

MD: Thanks for having me.

KB: Okay, and that's the end of the interview.