

Register-Pajaro

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Cabrillo opens veterans center

Students can find services, support at new Aptos campus program

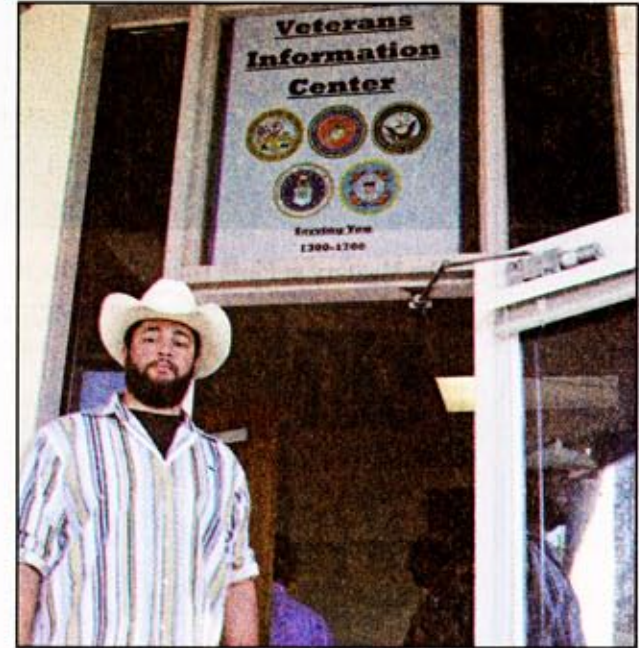
By TODD GUILD
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

The Cabrillo College Veterans Information Center, which caters to veterans who attend the school, celebrated its grand opening Wednesday afternoon. The center opened when classes started in August and helps veterans get the services they need, but also offers a gathering place for veterans who want a place to be with others who understand their day-to-day struggles. Student Roderick Moreland was one of the forces that helped turn the idea into a center.

When Moreland got out of the Air Force after serving in Alaska for four years, he moved to Santa Cruz to be with his wife. Soon, he began taking classes at Cabrillo College. He said he almost immediately began to miss the tightly knit society that forms in a military unit, and felt out of place in a world that no longer seemed to understand him. People who serve in the military, he said, have a different way of speaking, a different way of acting and, if they have seen action, an entirely different way of looking at the world.

"We live off camaraderie," he said of military culture. "We live off each other. We understand each other." Moreland also noticed a lack of supportive services for veterans at Cabrillo, such as helping them connect with their Veterans Affairs benefits, financial aid and academic counseling. "There wasn't a whole lot going on for vets," he said. Building on a loosely knit veteran's support group that already existed at Cabrillo, Moreland began advocating for

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Roderick Moreland stands in front of the Cabrillo College Veterans Information Center. Moreland was instrumental in the creation of the center. Todd Guild Register-Pajaronian

VETERANS

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a dedicated center for his fellow veterans. "I recognized the need for services with weight behind them," he said. When Dave Demming was released from the United States Marine Corps in March, he encountered a society very different from the one he had grown used to while serving in Afghanistan. During a recent class at Cabrillo, a teacher gave an incorrect assessment of the roadside bombs frequently encountered by soldiers in Afghanistan. Demming, who worked with aviation ordnance and has a good idea of how the bombs work, disputed the teacher, and a verbal confrontation ensued. The incident so upset Demming that he went to the Veterans Information Center, where he found several vets who completely understood why he was distressed. "If it wasn't for this center, I don't know if I could have stayed in school," he said. "People here have the same experiences and the same feelings as you." Demming now volunteers his time at the center. Dr. Francisco Ponce, a counselor who has worked at Cabrillo since 1988 and who serves as the center's academic counselor, said he got out of the U.S. Army in 1976, and came into a world that was overtly hostile



Todd Guild/Register-Pajaronian

Santa Cruz County Veteran Advocate Dean Kaufman helps a veteran connect with services at the Cabrillo College Veterans Information Center on Wednesday.

to military personnel. "I was hiding," he said. "I didn't want to be identified." Ponce said society has shifted to be more accepting of veterans, but stressed that the center will serve an important role for Cabrillo's 169 veterans. "They need a place where they can talk to each other and feel supported," he said. "Vets know their stories and their histories. It's a culture in itself." Taylor Hahn, 24, served four years with the U.S. Army Reserve, and spent the last 13 months of his service in Afghanistan. He is one of two interns at the center paid by the VA. "This is an awesome resource for information," he said. "I wish they had it when I enrolled." When he returned from Af-

ghanistan, where a U.S.-led war has been raging for 10 years, Hahn said he was amazed to hear people complaining about such trifling things as lost cell-phone signals and mistaken restaurant orders. "It's a different society," he said. ... The Cabrillo College Veterans Information Center is in the 900 building in room 914, just under the cafeteria. Ponce, Cabrillo's academic counselor for veterans, is available at the Veterans Information Center on Tuesdays from 8 a.m. to noon. Dean Kaufman, Santa Cruz County's veteran advocate, will provide assistance for veterans seeking benefits from the VA on Mondays from 1-5 p.m.