



Career Choices for Spouses get a Boost

The MyCAA program offers tuition assistance to pursue portable careers.

BY SARA GRAVES

When Marjorie Cooper moved with her husband to Whidbey Island, Wash. in 2007, she was at a loss at what to do for work. Before she moved, she had been actively involved in Florida politics. But having moved too far from Washington state's political hub to continue her career in politics, she decided to become a realtor instead.

"I wanted to do real estate for a long time, but I didn't have the courage to do it," said Cooper, who was originally from England, but moved to Florida in December 2003.

After pursuing real estate for a year, Cooper heard from a military spouse about home staging and the Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts program, or MyCAA. Home staging is preparing homes for sale so they sell faster and for more money (see sidebar for more information on home staging).

"I'm really creative," she said. "My passion is design. I wouldn't have thought that staging would have been (part of) that program," she said.

For Cooper and other military spouses like her, the Department of Defense's (DoD) MyCAA is an excellent way to pursue an education leading to a portable career. Portable

careers are those that can be pursued in most stateside locations that military service members are stationed.

"Oftentimes spouses find themselves at a new installation challenged with finding a new job in their current career," said Karen Pedersen, vice president at Southwestern College Professional Studies. "Having additional educational funds available for military spouses will perhaps allow more of them to pursue their education while their spouse is serving in the military."

Through the program, spouses of active duty members and activated members of the Guard and Reserve receive up to \$6,000 of tuition assistance that can help them pursue education, training, licenses, certificates and degrees.

However, the program does not cover the cost of computers, school application fees, childcare, transportation, testing fees, medical services, parking, student activity cards or graduation fees. If the cost of the course includes books or supplies, the program will pay that cost.

"MyCAA provides the 'seed' money which will enable a spouse to start or continue a college program that will lead to viable employment or a potential promotion at the current workplace," said Jim Sweizer, vice president (**See page 28**)

Home Staging Travels with You

When military spouse Marjorie Cooper was looking for a way to combine her interests in real estate, design and interior decorating, a fellow military spouse told her about home staging. Shortly afterwards, she decided to pursue home staging through the help of the MyCAA program.

Staging is the art of preparing a residential home for sale to increase the likelihood it will be bought swiftly and for more money. Unlike decorating, home staging is the art of depersonalizing a home so potential buyers can imagine themselves living in that space.

Barb Schwarz said she developed the idea of staging in the 1970s while working as a real estate agent. At the time, Schwarz, who had previously pursued a career in theater, was having trouble selling a home because it was “a mess.”

Consequently, Schwarz asked the seller, “Do you like the theater?”

“What does that have to do with selling my house?” the seller replied.

“Let’s pretend your house is a ‘set’ on the stage of a play or a movie,” Schwarz said. “We need to set the scene for each room in the house. The buyers are the audience, you (the seller) are the producer and the lead actress.” Schwarz would be the director.

In order for them to “stage” each room, Schwarz explained in her book, *Home Staging: The Winning Way to Sell Your House for More Money*, they would have to clean up the house and straighten it up. Then they would “audition specific furniture pieces in different rooms to give the house a fresh, new look.”

“Your house is your number one investment,” she said. When you sell your home, “you must detail your house like you would detail your car.”

In fact, for Schwarz and other ASPs, the first impression is critical to selling a home.

She said sellers have six seconds or less to make the first impression for those who walk in, and three seconds or less for the 87 percent of all buyers who do their initial shopping for homes on the Internet.

And if the statistics found on Schwarz’s website, www.stagedhomes.com, are correct, staging works.

A reportedly 94.8 percent of ASP (Accredited Staging Professional) Staged Homes sell on average in 37 days or less. Conversely, it takes 182 days or more for a non-staged home.

For Schwarz and other ASPs, very little is required to stage a home for sale.

In fact, Schwarz said her two favorite tools of the trade are a pair of clippers and a ball of rope. She frequently “shops” the seller’s yard for flowers, branches and leaves, uses her clippers to cut them and then places them in vases or other decorative items in each room.

“Every room should have green in it,” she said. “Green and health and prosperity go together.”

The rope is used to tie items to walls, chairs, vases, curtain rods or anything else used in the staging.

For instance, to stage one boy’s room in a fishing theme, she placed the seller’s fishing pole (found in the garage) above the bed as a curtain rod and used the rope to tie it up. She placed one of the seller’s white sheets over it and used more rope to tie it back at the sides.

She placed a cut alder branch in a fishing boat, and added some more fishing theme items found in the garage and made a few decorative features from materials found in the home.

“We did a whole room with a rope, a pair of clippers and no money,” she said.

The beauty of a staging career for Cooper and other military spouses who have graduated from either or both of Schwarz’s three-day ASP or five-day ASPM courses, is the portability of the career. “I felt personally that I’m able to do what I want to do,” Cooper said. “If my husband moves, I can take it with me. I’m not stuck.”

Where You Can Go With Your MyCAA Benefits

As word of the MyCAA has grown, so have the number of colleges who have signed on to the MyCAA network of schools to offer degree programs and certificates for military students pursuing portable careers. Below are just a few of the many schools available to military spouses through the MyCAA portal.

American Military University www.amu.apus.edu

American Military University currently has 76 online degree programs and 51 certificate programs available for military spouses.

The more popular portable career choices for the 742 military spouses who have enrolled at the school since May 2009 include child and family development, paralegal studies, intelligence, business and criminal justice courses, said Jim Sweizer, vice president of military programs. Many military spouses are also enrolling in general education courses, such as English 101 and proficiency in writing.

“MyCAA has proven to be a tremendously popular and successful program,” Sweizer said. “The Department of Defense should do everything it can to ensure future funding of this program and investigate ways in which funding levels can be increased. Increasing funding levels will ensure military spouses can complete full degree programs, which will enhance their quest to find a fulfilling career.”

Thomas Edison State College www.tesc.edu

Thomas Edison State College, Trenton, N.J., currently has approximately 140 spouses enrolled into degree programs; 55 of those students are enrolled through the MyCAA program.

Thomas Edison offers degree programs and certificates in more than 100 areas of study. It also offers “flexible learning methods ranging from online courses and prior learning assessment to credit transfer and credit-bearing exams,” said Louis F. Martini, director of military and veteran education at Thomas Edison State College,

“We stay committed in providing high quality education on a flexible schedule no matter where in the world you may be,” Martini said.

Southwestern College Professional Studies

www.southwesterncollege.org

Southwestern College Professional Studies prides itself on the fact that 99 percent of the courses at Southwestern College are offered online, said Karen Pedersen, vice president at Southwestern College Professional Studies. “If a military spouse begins their education with us then must move with their service member or if the service member should become deployed: this spouse/learner will be able to continue coursework with us from wherever they are located.”

In addition, the school employs many staff members with a military background or connections, which “helps us to understand the benefits of the MyCAA program and to also help potential learners know and understand these benefits,” Pedersen said.

The more popular career choices for MyCAA students include elementary education, human resources, business quality management, security management, criminal justice and business administration.

“Our learners are seeking degrees at both the undergraduate and graduate levels and we even have one seeking a certificate in Executive Quality Management,” Pedersen said.

(From page 26) of military programs at American Military University. “It’s a win-win situation for the spouse and the community in which they reside.”

A military spouse of a Guard or Reserve member is eligible for the assistance from the date of the mobilization order until 180 days after the service member is demobilized. Military spouses who are also service members, or those who are legally separated or divorced are not eligible for the MyCAA assistance. Military spouses, who are interested in the MyCAA program, must first establish a MyCAA account at <https://aiportal.acc.af.mil/mycaa>. After the DoD verifies their eligibility using DEERS information, the spouse will be notified they have been approved.

If for some reason a spouse believes they should be eligible, but the DEERS information prevents them from being so, they should verify their DEERS information at (800) 538-9552.

Once the spouse decides what career path they would like to pursue and through what school, it’s time to start the application process at their college of choice. For a list of eligible schools already approved by the DoD for the MyCAA program, visit <https://aiportal.acc.af.mil/mycaa/User/Spouse/FindInstitution.aspx>.

“The MyCAA program allows spouses of military members to complete degrees that they would not otherwise be able to without the support of the program,” said Louis F. Martini, director of military and veteran education at Thomas Edison State College. **AF**



Dining room before: This photo shows a dining area before home staging.



Dining room after: This photo shows the same dining area after home staging.