

Hometown Hero: Wounded vet gains work skills and self-confidence



David Kendrick, wounded in Iraq, is learning new skills at the Bobby Dodd Institute in Atlanta. AT&T and NexxLinx are funding his training and he may go to work for one of the companies in a call center.

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By Bill Hendrick - For the AJC

Shot in the back and partially paralyzed by a sniper in Iraq, David Kendrick has gone through a lot — unemployment, rehabilitation and homelessness. Now the 26-year-old is back on track, working at the non-profit Bobby Dodd Institute as a call center specialist, trying to learn a trade — and gaining self-confidence.

He completed a rehabilitation program and moved from New York to work at the Bobby Dodd Institute, where he's learning customer care for people who encounter difficulties when using cell phones outside the U.S.

Kendrick, wounded in both legs in 2007, is part of a program at the BDI to provide customer care for AT&T and

specialty-call center operator NexxLinx.

He is surrounded by other vets, including the guy who runs the place, Wayne McMillan, 66, who was wounded in Vietnam in 1968 and is determined to make life easier for returning vets.

BDI has been helping people with mental and physical disabilities for 45 years, but the program to help veterans is relatively new, a team effort with AT&T and Atlanta-based NexxLinx.

McMillan says the partnership is “a great example of commercial and non-profit” entities working together.

“We hire veterans with and without disabilities,” McMillan says. “We employ 93 veterans and 38 work in our call center. Some were homeless. And joblessness is a problem because 300,000 veterans are coming out of the military every year. The transition is hard for some. We try to make it easier.”

Bill Hague, who heads AT&T's program aimed at enabling veterans, says men and women learn skills in the military that make them ideal call center workers — patience, politeness and esprit de corps.

“Not everybody is a good care rep,” Hague says. “So we partnered with Bobby Dodd and NexxLinx. NexxLinx put up some money, we put up some money, we built a training center. The gist is, we are hiring vets for care calls on behalf of AT&T.”

He says NexxLinx is perfect to help AT&T meet its goals because it specializes in call centers and knows how to train employees.

NexxLinx plans to hire 30 more in coming months, he says.

BDI named AT&T “Employer of the Year” for its commitment to employing veterans. Plans call for expanding the Bobby Dodd methodology to help returning vets around the country, says NexxLinx CEO Craig Mento.

“We find they have the discipline and maturity to make outstanding associates,” he says.

Veterans like Kendrick agree.

“At BDI, I have meaningful employment – something I am proud to be a part of,” he says. “I love being a part of a team of veterans. It's like being in the military again.”

Chiquita Loveless, 49, spent 23 years in the Navy, including service board two aircraft carriers, but is disabled with arthritis.

She served time in “call center operator boot camp” and has been promoted to team manager.

She hopes to work for NexxLinx or AT&T full-time.

Yolanda Savage, 34, found herself jobless and homeless after her discharge from the Army. She lived in a shelter for several months with her six-year-old daughter.

“It feels good to be working and supporting myself,” she says.