

# Crane program helps returning veterans gain new skills, find jobs: [www.heraldtimesonline.com](http://www.heraldtimesonline.com)

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Anthony Edwards thought he would always be able to rely on his physical capabilities to provide for his family. The bomb changed his perspective.

"I told my son to get a skill — it's something no one could ever take from you," Edwards said. "It just never hit me that I, physically, would not be able to do that."

Edwards, who joined the Illinois National Guard in 1983 and found himself serving as a sergeant first class in Iraq in 2004, can still recall every gruesome detail about the night that changed his life forever.

During a mission, a roadside bomb exploded and hit the truck Edwards was driving. The blast blew the tires off his truck and rolled it over several times. One soldier was killed and two severely injured.

"It felt like someone hit me in the shoulder with a baseball bat," Edwards said of the wound that left his left shoulder disabled. Later, Edwards received the Purple Heart honor from President George W. Bush in person.

"It was something I am very proud of," he said. "It was an honor."

Edwards was honorably discharged in 2007, but was unable to rely on his physical skills as a mechanic to get a job in the civilian world.

Then Edwards found his second chance at a new career and an opportunity to further his education, in 2008, as a participant in the Crane Learning and Education Center program. Now Edwards is working on a bachelor's degree in business administration and also working full time at the Naval Surface Warfare Center at Crane.

He credits Crane with his accomplishments in the program.

"CLEC gives you the foot in the door that you need, to start a new career," he said. "I'm not sure I would have been able to do that anywhere else."

CLEC began as a pilot program in 2007 through combined efforts of the Indiana Office of Defense Development, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Indiana Department of Workforce Development and the Lilly Endowment. It provides job training and assistance to veterans wounded during their service in the military. Crane has served as the primary employer for the program's participants.

"From the day we hired the first person, I measured it as a successful program," said Larry McRoberts, creator of the program and director of veterans programs at NSWC Crane.

CLEC evolved from McRoberts' idea that there was a need for a better program, without the bureaucracy and red tape that other programs presented, that could help disabled veterans find jobs and reintegrate into society swiftly.

"We wanted to start a program that wrapped its hands around everything, including family issues," he said. "Our goal from day one was to build a comprehensive program."

The program moved into phase two from its pilot status in 2009 with support from the Lilly Endowment, which established CLEC as a permanent independent program. The program has helped more than 100 veterans and earned numerous accolades. It may become a nationally established, federally funded program in the near future.

"This has been the most rewarding experience I have ever had," McRoberts said. "We're changing people's lives. This is what we should have been doing all along."

Melissa Russell, one of the first CLEC participants, served in the Indiana National Guard for eight years and spent 15 months in Iraq.

She now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and partial hearing loss. After being discharged from the Guard, she faced a divorce and lost custody of her son. To cope, she worked multiple jobs, with no long-term career opportunities.

Her dream was to continue her education, but felt that her circumstances were holding her back. The Veterans Affairs office referred her to the CLEC program in 2007, and she has been moving closer toward her goal ever since.

"I really wanted to go back to school, and I didn't see the opportunity," she said. "CLEC gave me the opportunity to get job training and work on my bachelor's degree. It was like a dream come true."

Russell, who is now employed through the program as a logistics management specialist at Crane, said the program helped her manage her long-term goals. She encourages other disabled veterans to take advantage of the opportunities the unique program offers.

"It's an honor to have been one of the first 11 and an honor to see how big it has gotten," she said. "My life has been changed."

**Melissa Russell served in the Indiana National Guard for eight years and spent 15 months in Iraq. "CLEC gave me the opportunity to get job training and work on my bachelor's degree," she says. "It was like a dream come true." Courtesy photo**

