

From Navy service to world-renowned barbecue, ASU alum Sterling Smith inspires fellow veterans

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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Veterans and their dependents gathered April 22 at Arizona State University's [Pat Tillman Veterans Center](#) not just to learn how to cook brisket, but to hear a story about discipline, reinvention and purpose.

Sterling Smith, a Navy veteran and founder of [Loot N' Booty BBQ](#), led a hands-on cooking demonstration for about a dozen attendees, sharing both technique and personal insight.

Smith, who served in the military from 1994 to 1998, later graduated from ASU's [W. P. Carey School of Business](#) with a finance degree in 2002 before building an award-winning barbecue brand.

He is a 2022 World Barbecue Champion who has collected more than 55 grand and reserve championships and over 800 top 10 finishes. His company, which he runs with his wife, Molly, sells rubs and sauces in thousands of stores worldwide, and he has taught barbecue techniques to grilling aficionados in multiple countries.

Still, Smith told the group his path was anything but direct.

"I've been working here in the Valley in the financial services industry for several years," Smith said. "About 10 years ago, I quit all that. I said, 'You're done banking' and now I cook meat in parking lots across the world."

That leap from finance to full-time entrepreneur became a central theme of the event, which blended cooking instruction with lessons on transition and identity after military service.

[Shawn Banzhaf](#), executive director of the Tillman Center, said Smith was invited because his story reflects what many veterans strive to achieve after leaving the military.

“Sterling’s a veteran, he’s local, he’s an ASU alum and he’s a world champion barbecue master,” Banzhaf said. “When you put all those things together and start thinking about veteran well-being, there is such a thing as finding yourself in the kitchen. He finds peace at his barbecue grill, and I feel like these veterans can do that too.”

Banzhaf added that Smith’s journey from military service to banking and eventually entrepreneurship offers a relatable example for student veterans navigating their own transitions.

During the demonstration, Smith broke down the science of cooking brisket while tying it back to the discipline he developed in the Navy.

“Cooking is a science and a lot goes into it,” he said.

That message resonated with attendees.

Cedric Dorelien, a second-year ASU student and military dependent, said witnessing a veteran succeed in a completely different field was uplifting.

“Seeing a veteran do his thing and be happy about what he’s doing after his service is really inspiring,” said Dorelien, who is majoring in both marketing and supply chain management in the W. P. Carey School of Business.

For Navy veteran Jenna Conder, the appeal was both practical and personal.

“I wanted to learn how to make a brisket,” said Conder, an applied biological sciences major in the [College of Integrative Sciences and Arts](#). “But I also liked that he did everything himself, regarding his business. That’s something I want to do too.”

Marine veteran Romeo Romero pointed to Smith’s ability to translate his education and military experience into a business.

“He got his degree and created a business from that,” said Romero, an information technology and networking major in the [Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering](#).

Smith echoed those ideas, explaining that the structure and focus he learned in the military helped shape his approach to both cooking and entrepreneurship.

Barbecue competitions, he said, offered a familiar environment.

“You have a mission, you’re organized, you’re focused and you have all your buddies around you,” Smith said.

What began as a hobby eventually turned into a global business, with Smith building a brand recognized worldwide.

Despite the accolades, he emphasized that his identity as a veteran remains central to everything he does.

"I'm proud of it," he said, "and I'm always going to say it."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU alumnus and Navy veteran Sterling Smith (right) prepares brisket sandwiches alongside his wife, Molly, as part of a class on entrepreneurship and business management for a dozen student veterans and their dependents on Wednesday, April 22, at the Pat Tillman Veterans Center at Mountain America Stadium. After the military and a career in finance, Smith became a world champion barbecue cook and formed his company, Loot N' Booty BBQ, which sells products worldwide. He's also written two books and held nearly 250 cooking classes. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



During an entrepreneurship class/cooking demonstration on April 22 at ASU's Pat Tillman Center, ASU alumnus, Navy veteran and world-renowned barbecue cook Sterling Smith told attendees that he applies the discipline he developed in the Navy to the science of cooking brisket.



Smith, who left a job in finance 10 years ago to pursue his barbecue passion, has taught cooking classes in multiple countries.



Smith's barbecue business, Loot N' Booty, sells dozens of rubs in stores worldwide.



Smith's accolades include being named the 2022 World Barbecue Champion.



From left: Third-year students Joshua Coley, Romeo Romero and Cesar Lopez watch Smith prepare a slab of brisket after he shared lessons from his journey of starting a barbecue business after leaving the military.



Smith slices a finished brisket for attendees to try.



Computer engineering doctoral candidate and Marine Corps veteran David Ramirez enjoys a brisket sandwich after Smith's lecture.