

An ongoing mission of service: Tillman Center marks 15 years

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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Story highlights

ASU's Pat Tillman Veterans Center is celebrating 15 years of helping veterans and military families find community, pursue their education and continue a legacy of service.

Today, the center's mission reaches nearly 23,000 veterans and military-affiliated learners across the university.

Joe Warhol admits he was a little rough around the edges when he was discharged from the Marines and started his academic journey at Arizona State University.

He arrived at ASU in 2014, fresh from a combat deployment and uncertain about how to navigate a world that operated differently from the military. The structure, shared purpose and familiar rhythms of service were gone. College presented a new mission, but Warhol had yet to figure out how he fit into it.

The [Pat Tillman Veterans Center](#) helped him find his footing. Staff members did not shy away from difficult conversations, Warhol recalled. They met him directly, veteran to veteran, and helped him adjust to life on campus.

"When I came to ASU and I was a student, I didn't know my left from my right, and didn't know what I was doing," Warhol said. "But thankfully, the Pat Tillman Veterans Center at the time had some of the same staff that's here right now; (they) kind of adjusted me in the right way, had some tough kneecap-to-kneecap, eyeball-to-eyeball conversations."

Warhol graduated from the university in 2016, returned to active duty and eventually came back to ASU as a staff member at the center, helping other veterans make the same transition. Today, he is a founding board member and deputy director of the [Home of Record Project](#), a Mesa-based nonprofit that assists veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Its 16-unit property will eventually have capacity for up to 36 veterans.

On Aug. 14, Warhol was back among the community that had once helped him, this time to celebrate the Tillman Center's 15th anniversary and to be honored for giving back to the veteran community.

The milestone offered a chance to measure how far the center has come since ASU established it 15 years ago with a commitment to give veterans and military-connected students not simply a place on campus, but a place designed to help them thrive. Today, the center's mission reaches nearly 23,000 veterans and military-affiliated learners across the university.

[Shawn Banzhaf](#), executive director of the Pat Tillman Veterans Center, said the center's work is rooted in helping veterans move from a military culture where blending in can be second nature to a university community where they are recognized as individuals and encouraged to lead.

"It's our distinguished honor to help veterans when they transition from this space where cover and concealment and hiding is the norm to a place where they're seen," Banzhaf said at a dinner and awards ceremony to commemorate the center's crystal anniversary. "We're trying to show veterans that you should be seen."

The center began with fewer than 2,000 military-connected students and a single location in the lower level of the Memorial Union. Its responsibilities have expanded dramatically, from processing thousands of GI Bill benefits each semester to working with partners across ASU to support students' academic success and overall well-being.

Leticia Verdugo, director of student business support at the center, has watched much of that growth firsthand. She joined in the center's sixth year, when processing benefits for 5,000 students seemed daunting.

"Every year is the same question: How are we going to do this?" Verdugo said. "Every year we keep growing. But why do we do this? The 'why' is the reason why PTVC exists. It's in honor of Pat Tillman. In honor of our comrades. In honor of those who've served. In honor of those who are currently serving. And last but not least, their family members."

That mission extends beyond benefits and paperwork. The center works with offices across ASU to create programs and a community designed to help military-connected students persist through graduation.

[Wanda Wright](#), director of the [Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement](#), pointed to [Treks for Vets](#), a collaborative four-day wilderness program that gives veteran students an opportunity to work through challenges and return to school refreshed.

"We're really proud to collaborate with the Tillman Center because it's renowned," Wright said. "It's known across the nation as a great veteran center. They establish a great space for our students, and it's just needed. It's needed to make sure that we have a supportive campus for those students, whether they're veterans, active duty, reserve, Guard or dependents."

For ASU alumnus and Marine veteran Gary Schell, the center's impact was immediate. Schell attended ASU from 2016 to 2018, earning a master's degree in homeland security and emergency management. He said the center helped him navigate his GI Bill benefits and begin his education quickly after leaving the Marine Corps.

More important, he said, it gave him a community.

"The culture was huge, and it was being able to take what we had in the military, and the best of that, which was the pursuit of excellence, and translate that into higher education," said Schell, chairman and executive director of Home of Record Project, who was celebrated alongside Warhol with an award. "Being at Pat Tillman felt like I was actually around my peers and we were all moving towards the same common mission again. That was our success in higher education."

Fifteen years after its founding, the center's anniversary is both a celebration of what has been built and a reminder that its work continues with every veteran, service member and military family member who arrives at ASU looking for a new mission and a community.

For Banzhaf, that future remains connected to the standard set by the man whose name the center carries.

"It wasn't just about opening a single office in the Memorial Union," Banzhaf said. "It was a commitment to build a legacy worthy of Pat's standard. A place where service doesn't end when the uniform comes off but simply evolves into a new way of leading."

ASU Pat Tillman Veterans Center Day Celebration Awards

In the Spirit of Pat Tillman Award – Jerry Gonzalez, assistant director, ASU Media Relations

Pat Tillman Veterans Center Champion Award – American Legion Post 39

Sun Devil for Life Award – Gary Schell and Joe Warhol, Home of Record Project

Pat Tillman Veterans Center Horizon Award – Canon USA

Pat Tillman Veterans Center Legacy Award – Christian Rauschenbach, retired director, Pat Tillman Veterans Center

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

Main image



Service awards were handed out at the 15th anniversary celebration of the Pat Tillman Veterans Center, held Friday, Aug. 14, at the San Tan Ford Club at Mountain America Stadium in Tempe. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Sun Devil Vet for Life Award winner Joe Warhol (along with Gary Schell) speaks at the 15th anniversary celebration of the Pat Tillman Veterans Center. The retired Marines are founding board members of the Home of Record Project, a Mesa-based nonprofit that assists veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Around 120 supporters attend the 15th anniversary celebration of the Pat Tillman Veterans Center on Friday, Aug. 14, at the San Tan Ford Club at Mountain America Stadium. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Tillman Center Executive Director Shawn Banzhaf (left) presents the Spirit of Pat Tillman Award to Jerry Gonzalez, assistant director of ASU Media Relations, during an event celebrating the Tillman Center's 15th anniversary. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News