Rachel Costello discovered that necessity was the mother of invention when she found sleeping difficult in the months after undergoing several surgeries to remove brain cancer. Those sleepless nights sparked a desire to find a solution.

“When you have a brain surgery or head injury of any kind, you have to sleep sitting up for about two to three months,” said Costello, a retired Navy master chief petty officer. “So we came up with a device that allowed you to do that.”

She co-founded her company, Bonna Vita Ventures, in 2017 and soon had a prototype ready for manufacturing. However, as the economic outlook changed, it became impossible to bring the medical device to market at a sustainable price.

Rather than lose hope, she did what veterans do when confronted with seemingly insurmountable challenges—she
adapted, pivoting her businesses in a completely different direction. Today, Bonna Vita Ventures consults with small companies, with a focus on veteran-owned startups.

Looking for guidance on how best to transform her business efficiently, she turned to Patriot Boot Camp, a nonprofit tailored exclusively to assist service members, veterans and military spouses with innovating, launching and scaling a business.

Founded in 2012, Patriot Boot Camp offers 50 entrepreneurs an in-depth three-day basic training providing mentorship, education and access to a robust network of peers and experts. Patriot Boot Camp is typically held in person, but like other in-person events this year, they went completely virtual for the first time due to the coronavirus pandemic.

DAV partnered with Patriot Boot Camp to sponsor the event in October, connecting entrepreneurs with an invaluable education and practical advice.

Veteran entrepreneurs and Patriot Boot Camp alumni Eric Miller (left) and Rachel Costello (right) said the intensive training was vital to transforming their technology-focused businesses.
“DAV was proud to partner with Patriot Boot Camp and bring this outstanding program for military veteran and spouse entrepreneurs on a virtual platform,” said National Employment Director Jeff Hall. “Nearly 50 enthusiastic entrepreneurs engaged with, and learned from, a full ensemble of participating companies and incredible mentors who shared their business knowledge, expertise and strategies for success.”

In general, the military community fits naturally with the unpredictable nature of launching a business, said Navy spouse and Patriot Boot Camp CEO Jen Pilcher.

"Whether you’re on active duty, in the reserves, or a veteran or military spouse, you are trained in the unknown," said Pilcher. “With COVID-19, the world is feeling a lot of pain with all this unpredictability, but that can feel like every day in military life.”

Sixteen classes of entrepreneurs have been trained in 12 cities across the United States since 2012. The extended alumni network includes more than 950 military, veteran and military spouse entrepreneurs worldwide. More than 60% have a service-connected disability, 18% are women, and more than a quarter are people of color.

Eric Miller, who in 2019 attended both Patriot Boot Camp in Utah and Patriot Boot Camp RISE—an alumni program—in North Carolina, said that interacting with fellow entrepreneurs and business experts fundamentally changed his software company.

“These people who have been down the road can look back from a business standpoint and tell you what will and what won’t work,” said Miller, a flight nurse in the Wyoming Air National Guard and CEO of PIACET. “They’ll tell you when you need to pivot and when you need to keep going—we’ve had some unbelievable mentorship.”

The motivation for launching Patriot Boot Camp grew out of
recognizing an opportunity gap for military and veteran entrepreneurs.

“There’s such a history of entrepreneurial veterans—I saw that in my grandfather when he retired from the Air Force—and I just thought we should do more as a startup community to ensure those doors are open and those pathways are built,” said Patriot Boot Camp co-founder Taylor McLemore. “It’s important to have our program be an opportunity to really explain what it means to be an entrepreneur.”

The tactical and practical workshops, including marketing, sales and finance, are hallmarks of the events. But what makes Patriot Boot Camp stand out from other programs is the opportunity for mentorship, which was based on McLemore’s vision, said Pilcher.

The program is highly competitive, with applications for each class reaching into the hundreds. When selecting a maximum of 50 attendees, McLemore said the primary driver is potential.

“We look for people that are aligned in their desire to really explore the direction their business is taking them,” he said. “Sometimes, that takes the form of someone who’s already started, who is further down the entrepreneurial journey, but we very much also embrace people that are earlier on it.”

Costello, an alumna of previous boot camps who also participated in the one in October, said this past event was superior to any other conference she’s attended.

“Patriot Boot Camp sharpens the tools you already have that the military instilled in you,” added Costello. “And it gives you an entirely new skill set and advice on how to live your dreams.”

Learn more
To apply and learn more about what the program has to offer, go to patriotbootcamp.org.