UAlbany Weekend MBA Stories – Craig Papke
Agent, State Farm Insurance in Greece, NY
Commander, U.S. Navy
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When life gets crazy, you call in the Navy. “I was at the mid-point of my UAlbany Weekend MBA Program when the 9-11 terrorist attacks happened,” explains Craig Papke, Commander, U.S. Navy. “My wife Erin and I had a two-year-old son, Ryan, and our daughter Claire was born the following April. I was holding down a full-time management job at State Farm and working hard on my 698 (final MBA project) when I was mobilized to active duty in Washington D.C. for Operation Enduring Freedom and eventually Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

“Let’s work the problem, people. Let’s not make things any worse by guessing.”

This is Craig’s mantra and also a favored quote of his from actor Ed Harris as Gene Kranz in the movie Apollo 13. But let’s back up and fill in some blanks.

Craig Papke earned his liberal arts degree in political science from Buffalo State and, before graduation, was appointed to the U.S. Navy Officer Candidate School. He spent some time working in corporate banking and once off active duty, began work on his MBA at Canisius College in Buffalo.

Craig stopped pursuit of his MBA when he moved to Syracuse and later, Ballston Spa, NY, married his wife and started working at State Farm Insurance.

A big fan of business and of learning, Craig longed to find the right niche to complete his MBA. “I really enjoy business and wanted a more technical degree than liberal arts,” he shares. Fate was just around the corner.

In September 2000, he arrived early to a State Farm management conference at a local bed & breakfast. Craig struck up a conversation with the man setting up the conference, Dale Shook, University at Albany professor and director of the university's International Marketing Assistance Service program (IMAS).

“He began telling me about the UAlbany Weekend MBA Program which started that month and I couldn’t help but share I’d been dying to find the right place to finish my MBA,” says Craig with excitement. “He
asked me some questions and said if I was willing to work quickly, I could likely join the class that had already commenced.”

Craig’s love for military protocol to prepare and train played in his favor. “It’s all about how quickly you are willing to scramble and get the necessary paperwork done in order to move forward,” he explains. He did just that, gained special dispensation at the eleventh hour, and ended up whipping together a workable financial package using his GI bill, scholarships, and help from State Farm. “I couldn’t have made it happen without the concurrent support from my commanding officer, my manager at State Farm and, most importantly, my wife.”

Craig Papke joined the current cohort and even with his mobilization to Washington D.C., he graduated with his class from the University at Albany Weekend MBA Program in 2002. “The experience is unmatched,” tells Craig. “There is a lot of commitment and investment from the faculty and it’s evident they truly enjoy themselves. They had immense respect for us as adult learners with families and careers and really treated us like colleagues.”

Worried about being overwhelmed with work and outrageous expectations, Craig was pleased to find the program maintained rigor and integrity with the understanding it wasn’t the only thing students were doing from day to day.

“The cohort structure melded together the unique perspectives and experiences that each of us had lived to that point,” Craig shares. “I was a Navy officer and manager at State Farm learning with CEOs, scientists from GE, a nurse, a radiologist, an executive from the newspaper industry and even a former Army officer. It was neat to have everyone bring their technical skills, leadership, and management experience.”

The UAlbany Weekend MBA Program dared Craig to become more entrepreneurial in nature. “Which is not something I thought I’d gravitate toward,” he divulges. “This program showed me it’s possible and gave me something to consider. Hearing the stories of entrepreneurs inspired me.”

Conservative in nature, Craig was always drawn toward corporate comforts. Although he admired the courage of entrepreneurs, he knew they were risk takers. With two small children at home, he didn’t think he had it in him.

After 10 years working for State Farm in Syracuse and Ballston Spa, he became a State Farm agent in Greece, NY outside of Rochester.

“I was lucky to work for State Farm as an employee first because it allowed me to dip my toes in the water and still have the backing of a solid corporate company,” he shares. “After earning my MBA, I took the risk of entrepreneurship with State Farm and stomached working day to day, looking at numbers and realizing, ‘Those are MY numbers, not anyone else’s. This is not a budget someone gave me. I’m responsible.’”
Earning his MBA enabled Craig to see there are many ways to do things and there is room for creativity, even within a corporate structure. “My MBA opened my eyes and I have definitely taken some risks as a Navy Commander and CEO of my own State Farm agency because I understand there are possibilities.”

To professionals considering pursuit of UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program, Craig advises, “There are a lot of different venues to ‘punch the ticket’ of earning an advanced degree, including online. The biggest differentiator for me at UAlbany, which I kind of stumbled into at the bed & breakfast that morning, is it is well respected for value both financially and academically. Without it, I never would have dreamed as big as owning my own insurance agency.”

Craig Papke leaves us with his favorite quote; the one he has perched above his desk. It’s an excerpt from Theodore Roosevelt’s speech "Citizenship In A Republic," which he delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France on April 23, 1910:  THE MAN IN THE ARENA... It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Click here to learn more about UAlbany’s executive Weekend MBA Program.

Connect with Craig Papke here:

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