



XAVIER UNIVERSITY
SOCIAL WORK

Social work alum follows passion to help active and veteran military suffering with mental health struggles

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As the United States marks the twentieth anniversary of terrorist attacks this year, many veterans of wars that began after Sept. 11, 2001, continue to address mental health issues with roots in those conflicts. The United States withdrawal from Afghanistan and the re-emergence of Taliban control have exacerbated these struggles. According to the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), between 11 and 20 percent of veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan experience PTSD.



Michael Brennan BSW '07, understands the trauma of PTSD and other mental health struggles and has built his career on treating the lingering scars in soldiers and their families. Brennan holds a Doctor of Psychology degree from Adler University and is currently the Section Chief of the Recruit Evaluation Unit at the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center as well as Chief of Behavioral Health for the Wisconsin National Guard.

“Michael was originally a business major who somehow found his way to my Intro to Social Work course,” Dr. Margo Heydt, Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work at Xavier said. “Michael was one of those students whose discovery of social work was life changing. He would sit in class and say ‘WHOA’ out loud as he continued to learn perspectives that connected the dots in new ways for him. After he changed his major to social work, we talked about Adlerian psychology as part of his practice classes.” Adlerian psychology from Alfred Adler is the psychological theory most closely aligned with the principles, values, and practice of social work. It focuses on the importance of nurturing feelings of belonging in the individual within the context of his community similar to social work’s Person in Environment foundational concept.

As a graduate student at Adler, Dr. Brennan developed an interest in studying how he could use his clinical psychology studies to help veterans and active duty military and joined the military during his studies. From that military psychology student group, he went on to serve over 10 years in the Army.

In 2014, Dr. Brennan was assigned to San Antonio Military Medical Center and became the first psychologist embedded within the 3d Cavalry Regiment at Fort Hood, Texas. He deployed to the eastern region of Afghanistan for nine months with the Regiment and was responsible for the mental health care of more than 8,000 military personnel. As he desired, he became one

of the first mental health professionals to provide emergency mental health care in the field just like “medics” provide physical health care on the spot. Dr. Brennan set up multiple mental health clinics in a deployed setting which decreased mental health stigma, decreased high-risk behavior, increased help-seeking behavior and improved the soldiers’ mental health, performance and resilience.

While deployed in Afghanistan, totally by coincidence, Dr. Brennan worked with another Xavier alumnus, Virgil Rivera '03. Virgil was an XU psychology major grad who then completed his MSW. “We are trying to be Men for Others in living the Jesuit tradition and do the social work/psychology/mental health profession at Xavier proud,” Dr. Brennan wrote to Dr. Heydt during his deployment. “We like to think we are the best team...because of our amazing training from Xavier.”



Upon leaving active duty, Dr. Brennan began work at The Road Home Program Center for Veterans and their Families at Rush University’s Medical Center. As the program’s Clinical Director, he was integral to securing a grant of over \$45 million from the Wounded Warrior Project, the largest philanthropic gift Rush University ever received in its 150-year history.

In 2019, Dr. Brennan was honored with the Adler University Leadership and Innovation Alumni Achievement Award in recognition of his passion to help those who are serving or have served in the military. Dr. Brennan’s social work and Ignatian roots as well as his commitment to the wellbeing of others have distinguished him in the military psychology field as he continues to serve for and with others at both micro and macro levels of practice.