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ASU alum, author, film producer comes full circle

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If experience is the best teacher, Clint Van Winkle is going to be a pretty good one. If experience is not what happens to you, but what you do with what happens to you, Clint Van Winkle oozes experience.

Van Winkle, who received his bachelor's degree in English from Arizona State University's [New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences](#) in 2005, is returning to the classroom, this time as a faculty member. He brings with him a growing bundle of experience that will fit nicely in the undergraduate writing classes he has been assigned to lead: "First-Year Composition," "Writing on War" and "American Biography."

A Marine Corps sergeant who fought in the Battle of Nasiriyah while serving in Iraq in 2003, Van Winkle returned to the States that year, did his New College undergraduate schooling and later successfully pursued his master's degree in creative and media writing from Swansea University in Wales. In 2009 he authored a book, "Soft Spots," that detailed his battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Most recently, he was one of five U.S. military veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan chosen by Brave New Foundation from nearly 100 applications to produce and direct their own documentary films.

Now he is returning to ASU's West campus where, he says, he began his writing career while working for the student weekly newspaper.

"To return to ASU and the [West campus](#) is very rewarding, both professionally and personally," says Van Winkle, a soft-spoken Florida native who now lives in Phoenix with his wife, Sara, who received her bachelor's degree in elementary education from ASU. "I am looking forward to be being on the other side of the podium and sharing what I know.

"Everybody has a story," he says. "Writing is hard work, really hard work, and if students want to be successful, they need to put in the time. There isn't an inspiration gnome that comes around and helps out."

Van Winkle should know. He has relied on his own experiences and his classroom lessons to shape his compositions, as well as his scriptwriting, directing and producing.

The frightful mind images, the agonizing memories of human-wrought destruction and man's inhumanity to man that Van Winkle brought home were haunting and inescapable. Just as numbing were his unsuccessful attempts to find help for what he later discovered was PTSD. His New College coursework allowed him to focus on writing and shaped a unique perspective on his classroom experience – a four-year degree program crammed into two years, complete with cum laude honors.

"I was better prepared for college because of the Marine Corps," he related in a review of his book last summer.

"College moves at a much slower pace, so it was easy for me to graduate more quickly than most."

But the going wasn't without its challenges, he remembers. "I didn't feel comfortable around other students, because I felt much older than all of them, even though I was only 25 years old when I started. They spent their summers at the beach; I'd spent mine shooting people and trying not to get shot. What did we have in common? How could they ever begin to understand?

"The West campus was a good fit. The professors were very supportive."

Eric Wertheimer is one of the faculty Van Winkle credits for his growth as a writer. Teachers Bob Early and Peter Aleshire, both former editors of Arizona Highways, are two others. Wertheimer, a professor in the New College [Division of Humanities, Arts and Cultural Studies](#), taught Van Winkle in his History of Literary Criticism class and championed him to Monica Casper,



Clint Van Winkle has returned to his academic roots at ASU's West campus – this time as a faculty member.

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director of the division.

"Eric introduced me to Clint's book while raving about what a wonderful student he had been," says Casper, who teaches graduate classes in critical trauma studies and also chairs the New College Veterans Affairs Committee. "He's a terrific writer and a lovely human being, and I'm confident he'll be a fantastic teacher."

"We're adding a new course to the curriculum tailored to his unique strengths: "Writing on War," which will be offered in the spring of 2011. He is already proactively planning which of his colleagues, many of them still active duty or veteran status, can contribute to his classroom via Skype (a software application that allows users to make voice calls over the Internet)."

As Van Winkle ran the seemingly endless gauntlet of PTSD treatment options, it wasn't until he met Joseph Little, a veteran of multiple tours during the war in Vietnam and a counselor at the Phoenix Vet Center, that he found support and understanding outside of wife Sara, whom he calls his "rock." Little's administration of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy allowed Van Winkle to mentally return to the battlefield, snap back to reality and then discuss, in depth, his feelings.

"Joe did two or three tours in Vietnam. He understands," Van Winkle says.

Feeling better for the experience, Van Winkle says he and Sara are in Phoenix "for good." While she is working for a local non-profit, he has started work on a second book and has served as a research associate with Swansea's Callaghan Centre for the Study of Conflict, Power, Empire in the university's School of Arts and Humanities.

And he received the call.

"Sara read a story about the 'Operation In their Boots' (OITB) documentary film project almost a year ago, when they were looking for participants, and she encouraged me to apply," says Van Winkle, whose screen project examines survivor's guilt among Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans. The story focuses on a former Marine staff sergeant who is grappling with the loss of his friend in Iraq and the emotions of escorting that friend's body to a final resting place.

"Forgetting about the Iraq War is a luxury I don't have," he writes on his OITB blog, which also appears on the Huffington Post. "Each time I take one of the pills that have been prescribed to me for PTSD, whenever I hear a car backfire, and when reports of another U.S. casualty roll across the bottom of the television screen, I go back to that land of bullets, bombs, and destruction. 'Clint,' I tell myself, 'It is over, move on.' But it will never be over for me. A piece of me will always be in Iraq."

"I only hope that I am able to convey my message on screen, that people will be able to get a sense of what it is like to be a combat veteran. The other Operation In Their Boots filmmakers want the same thing. We want Americans to pay attention to not only Iraq, but to the combat veteran experience. While my documentary focuses on the veteran readjustment process, the other documentaries cover topics such as U.S. soldiers and Islam; veterans attending college; substance abuse in Iraq and Afghanistan vets; and the story about how Rudy Reyes, a Force Recon Marine, overcame obstacles to become an actor and how he now uses his story to inspire others."

And now Van Winkle is adding to his résumé with his faculty assignment at ASU's West campus.

Casper, division director, is confident the incoming teacher will bring a great deal to ASU, inside and outside the classroom.

"In some ways, he is the typical New College student," she says. "He returned to school after a life experience, in his case the military; he brought his life experiences to bear on his studies; and he excelled in both a discipline, English and interdisciplinary work."

"He'll be invaluable as our veterans programming goes forward," she adds. "Just as an example, we are already collaborating on a Department of Defense grant to secure a veterans center at the West campus."

"It is fun to watch him open up when he is clearly passionate about a topic. Clint has, in my view, a quiet dignity and strength and a keen intellect that belies the on-the-ground action he has seen. It makes him an extremely effective communicator."