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UC San Diego Veterans Honored For Going Beyond the Call of Duty

Coming from a long line of veterans, John Cerda wanted to do his part to defend the country that had provided so much for his family. A UC San Diego alumnus and staff member, he served four years on active duty in the U.S. Army as a communications technician in the Signal Corps. After spending two years in

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Germany, he volunteered for Operation Restore Democracy in Haiti. “It changed me forever,” said Cerda. “It made me realize that I had so much to be thankful for and that I needed to continue to give back and make a difference.”

Cerda was honored on Nov. 6 as UC San Diego Veteran of the Year for going above and beyond his career duties to serve veterans on campus and in the community. A special ceremony was held in honor of Cerda as well as all staff, faculty and student veterans on campus. After a presentation of color by the MCRD Marine Corps Color Guard, those in attendance sang together “The Star Spangled Banner.”



John Cerda

The ceremony’s theme was “Celebration of Abilities” and featured a keynote address by Marine veteran and amputee triathlete Eric McElvenny. A Marine Infantry Officer, McElvenny stepped on an explosive device while on a patrol in Afghanistan. Soon after his surgery, his commanding officer called and asked him, “When are you going to run your first marathon?” Just 22 months later, he accomplished his first Iron Man triathlon. From his experiences he learned that character is defined by overcoming obstacles, and that often we are most proud of achieving what is difficult. Today, he coordinates the

Troops to Engineers Program at SDSU, advising students that, “If you have a challenge—go big.”

On behalf of UC San Diego, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Juan González thanked staff, faculty and student veterans for their service. “I believe we can never take anything for granted,” said González. “We thank those who fight for the freedoms we enjoy, particularly the student veterans who have continued on their journey here at UC San Diego. We must now serve them the best way we can and help them succeed.”

Cerda is director of Information Technology at the UC San Diego Shiley Eye Center and also serves as chair of the UC San Diego Veterans Association. He joined the organization for the camaraderie, and because he was inspired by other members who, despite having demanding jobs, are wholly committed to serving veterans on campus.

“I am completely honored to be this year’s UC San Diego Veteran of the Year,” said Cerda. “I have been inspired by so many people, both civilian and veteran, through my work with the UC San Diego Veterans Association. I am so grateful and will work hard to continue the tradition of service and sacrifice that previous winners have established.”

The UC San Diego Veterans Association raises awareness and promotes respect and appreciation for the sacrifices and contributions of veterans. The organization works closely with the [UC San Diego Student Veterans Resource Center](#) as well as the UC San Diego Student Veterans Organization to offer resources and social opportunities for veterans on campus.

“During my time here, I have found UC San Diego on the whole to be committed to veteran success,” said Donald Olsen, a UC San Diego transfer student veteran. “UC San Diego continues to rise to the challenge of addressing issues as they present themselves and allowing our community the autonomy to capitalize on our strengths for the benefit of the university.”



Marine veteran and amputee triathlete Eric McElvenny



Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Juan González

Olsen served six years in the U.S. Army Reserve, completing his service as a sergeant in a strategic level psychological operations unit. “I served with some truly amazing people that make me proud to call myself a soldier, both across the United States and on deployment to Afghanistan,” said Olsen. Currently studying psychology, he plans to obtain a doctorate degree in clinical psychology and provide therapy to veterans and active duty service members in San Diego.

Olsen is president of the UC San Diego Student Veterans Organization, which advocates for students of all military affiliations on campus. The student-led organization collaborates often with the [Student Veterans Resource Center](#), which was established last fall as a place for students, spouses and dependents of active duty military or veterans to bond and share perspectives. More than 300 students visit the center each quarter to find academic and career resources as well as take part in social and orientation programs.

“The center has really taken off in the past year as a place where students can find like-minded individuals to connect with,” said James Bond, inaugural director of the Student Veterans Resource Center. “Our primary goal is to help students transition from military service or community college to the university, ensuring that they feel welcome and connected.”

Bond emphasized that the first year of the center has been focused on community building. Each quarter, the center holds Feast with Friendlies, a program designed to connect veteran staff, faculty and students with campus and community supporters. A partnership was also recently established with the Transfer Engineering Academic Mentorship Program (T.E.A.M), led by the IDEA Center at the Jacobs School of Engineering, to connect student veterans majoring in engineering with faculty, graduate students and peer mentors. And community groups such as the San Diego Veterans Association and Veterans Association of North County host workshops on veteran benefits like home loans and tuition fee waivers.



UC San Diego Student Veterans Organization President Donald Olsen

“I think that the center is a great way for the university to let student veterans know that they are welcome on campus,” said Leana McNabb, a junior at Revelle College and program assistant at the Veterans Resource Center. “I think it also provides them some comfort in a new environment, a place to express themselves freely and find the resources that can benefit them on campus—kind of like a home base.”

McNabb came to UC San Diego to study biochemistry and cell biology when her husband, who is on active duty in the Navy, was transferred to San Diego. As program assistant at the center, she organizes events and meet-ups for all those on campus who have a tie to the military. “I’d like to think I see both sides of the coin,” she said. “I hope to be a resource for others transitioning or someone they can talk to about things they want to see at the center to have a better college experience.”

On Nov. 12, students from the UC San Diego Student Veterans Association took part in the annual Veterans Day Parade downtown, marching alongside veterans who served in past conflicts. On campus, the group also tabled on Library Walk to honor veteran leaders in the community who have excelled after completing their service and bring awareness to the problem of suicide among the veteran community.

“We always look forward to joining other student veteran organizations from colleges and universities across San Diego at the parade,” said Olsen. “It was an honor to march alongside many of the heroes that served in past conflicts.”

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