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Marine veteran finding new career through health and physical education at Georgia Southern

January 21, 2020



Jay Morrow explains an activity center to children during the annual Richmond Hill Fitness Days event on the Armstrong Campus.

After 20 years in the Marine Corps, Jay Morrow retired and decided to pursue a new career path mentoring and coaching children at the Boys and Girls Club near his home in Bluffton, South Carolina.

“After working there for about five years and coaching my own kids as they were growing up, I just fell in love with coaching and assisting young children and adolescents through life challenges through sports” he said. “One day I told my kids, once my oldest son starts college, then I’ll go back to school.”

And Morrow did just that, enrolling at the Georgia Southern University Armstrong Campus to major in Health and Physical Education (HPE). As a non-traditional student, Morrow wasn’t sure what to expect when returning to the classroom.

“At first, I thought I was going to be the oldest one in the classroom, and these young kids are going to be immature, but this was not the case on either,” he said. “It’s been a great learning experience for me and hopefully for the younger students as well. The younger students gravitate to the older students maybe because they feel like we might know a little bit more about life challenges or experiences. I can share a lot of life learning information and they can teach me a lot of new technology information that I have always

struggled with. It works both ways; I help them out by being a listener and mentor and they, in turn, help me out with new cultural updates and new technology information. It's definitely a two-way street."

He also chose to become involved in the Health and Physical Education Club, and currently serves as the vice president of the organization.

"The knowledge and background I have from my military career taught me that being in front of people leading, mentoring and being a positive influence for young students is important," he said. "I don't want to be that person that just stands by the side, I want to be that person that gets involved."

He felt more prepared for teaching from his previous experience leading others as a Marine.

"Being with the Marine Corps and doing that for 20 years as a drill instructor and senior leader to Marines kind of translates over to teaching and coaching in schools," he said. "As an older person with two kids of my own, I know how I raised them to be outstanding young gentlemen and be a productive member of society. That helps me mirror what I did with my own two kids to that of elementary kids as well."

Currently a junior in the bachelor's in health and physical education program, Morrow works as a basketball coach at Hardeeville Ridgeland Middle School in Hardeeville, South Carolina. The knowledge and skills he's gaining are preparing him for his end goal of becoming an athletics director at a college.

"Even at the middle school level, you need to know how the school runs, how to interact with students, how to interact with the staff, know what sports programs are out there and know how to manage finances," he said. "I think this is a great stepping stone for me to learn how schools are run."

One way Morrow and his peers put into practice the skills they've learned is through the Richmond Hill Fitness Days event held each fall on the Armstrong Campus. The event began 18 years ago after a former student in the program had the idea for local school children to come on campus and participate in physical activities planned by HPE majors.

"This collaborative effort gives our health and physical education majors the opportunity to plan and carry out activities that will enhance their knowledge gained in the classroom," said Lynn Roberts, assistant professor in the Department of Health Sciences and Kinesiology. "This event gives our majors a chance to work directly with children and to see how their ideas work when put into action. They also learn to make modifications, when needed, and to think on their feet when adjustments are needed."

Third graders from Richmond Hill Elementary School in nearby Richmond Hill, Georgia, attend the event where they participate in the annual program that features eight activity stations that emphasize cardiovascular endurance, flexibility and muscular strength and endurance.

"Every time the kids came through you could just see their eyes light up," Morrow said. "When they enter the gym they are just amazed at all the stuff around them. They are just so full of joy and excitement, and ready to go exercise."

The activities are designed as stations, with revolving groups of approximately 20 to 25 children per group with pre-planned modifications for students with special needs. Stations are set up inside and outside of the Sports Center for three hours of continuous movement.

Morrow and his fellow students will break down the exercises and activities of each station to explain to the school children to ensure safety and instructions.

“Of course we tell the kids that in all the events safety is important, but the number one thing we tell them is that they have fun and just get out there and enjoy physical activity as a part of life,” he said.

As an advocate for physical activity and overall well-being, Morrow believes the event is a great way to remind young children of the importance of being healthy.

“I think this event is beneficial for young kids in the community because it gives them self-awareness,” Morrow said. “It gives them another avenue to get physically active. It helps them learn that they don’t have to be that somebody who sits around and plays video games or just eats whatever they want. It’s about taking care of your body and living a healthy, productive lifestyle.”

Helping plan, coordinate and participate in the Richmond Hill Fitness Days event is an experience that has added to Morrow’s feeling of success in the program and for his future.

“I’ve been coaching recreation sports for a long time, and I really didn’t have the foundation of coaching in how to work with kids and the different learning styles they have,” he said. “What this program and major have done for me has helped me develop those skills. Now I can incorporate all those skills I’ve been taught into my coaching profession.”