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LINDA HOUK

Information Systems Solutions, Inc.

Headquarters:
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Number of Employees: 35

Military Service:
U.S. Air Force
1972 to 1993
Lt. Col. (O-5)

VETERAN INSTITUTE FOR PROCUREMENT PROGRAM CELEBRATES MILESTONE: 500TH GRADUATE

Applications now open for valuable, 3-day intensive business training program.

BY KATHLEEN GANSTER

LINDA HOUK WAS SEARCHING THE INTERNET LOOKING FOR VETERAN TRAINING PROGRAMS when the Veteran Institute for Procurement (VIP) popped up. And that was a very lucky thing for Houk, the CEO of Information Systems Solutions, Inc. (ISS).

"I learned so much – it was a great insight on how to do business with the experts from large federal contactors. It was so much more than a training program," Houk said. An Air Force veteran, Houk took over the business in 2005 – it was founded in 1997 – and attended VIP in 2010. ISS is an information technology company specializing in secure network architectures for intelligence and sensitive data information sharing.

VIP was created in 2009 by three colleagues. The first time someone suggested the idea to Barbara Ashe, she thought it was good, but as so often happens, it remained an idea. When it was suggested the second time, Ashe thought they should do something.



IDEA COMES TO FRUITION

That idea was to create a workshop for veterans who own small businesses to teach them how to procure government contracts. As the president of the Montgomery County Chamber Community Foundation in Rockville, Md., who worked with many veterans and businesses, Ashe could help get it done.

"It was first suggested by John Zuccaro, and I nodded and said, 'Yes,' but when I had another conversation and that person used almost the exact same words, I thought, 'My goodness, we should do something,'" Ashe said.

Ashe sat down with Zuccaro, a liaison officer with Lockheed Martin, and Barry Kane, a veteran who then worked for a veteran-owned business and the person who made the second suggestion, and the three created VIP. Ashe now serves as the national director of the program.



VIP was launched in the fall of 2009 targeting Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C. The curriculum was developed to assist veteran-owned businesses to increase their ability to win government contracts by establishing best business practices. The original program was held in a leased space and limited to 50 veteran business owners.

"We chose 50 because that is what the space could hold," Ashe laughed. ▶



RAYMOND JARDINE JR.

Native Hawaiian Veterans, LLC

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Website:
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Number of Employees: 220

Military Service:
Army, 1971 – 2004
Colonel (O-6)



► **GROWING PAINS**

The original program was an eight-session program that met every other week from 5 to 8 p.m., something that weighed heavy on the minds of the organizers.

“After the first class, we were standing there and Barry said, ‘Do you think they will come back?’ These people were giving up their time to come after running their businesses every day. We had to make it good,” Ashe said.

The participants did come back and they learned something from the government and business experts that the VIP team recruited to volunteer their time.

“We knew on the second class session that we were onto something impactful,” Ashe said.

When the first VIP program was over, not only were the participants delighted, they quickly spread the word so that others soon wanted to come to the next VIP and even more, others wanted it for their locations. At the request of a congressman, the team decided to try teaching at a second location. Since they had already slated their second session, they taught on Tuesday evenings in Frederick and Wednesdays in Bethesda. It made for a busy, but fulfilling time.

ALL ROADS LEAD HOME

From that experience, the VIP team learned they could replicate the program on the road, but it was difficult. And as more and more calls came in from all over

the country, they realized it was much better to bring the veterans to them.

“We have the experts and government agencies which are the prime contractors. To be successful, the veterans need access to information and relationships and they are here. We could harm their access if we took it on the road,” Ashe said.

In 2011, the program went national, bringing veterans into the Boldger Center, a conference center nearby that is a perfect setting. They reworked the program to be held in a three-day time frame for 27 hours and brought the veterans in. While the veterans had to pay for their own transportation, VIP paid the rest of the expenses.

“Can you imagine what that did to my budget?” Ashe said.

In the past few years, VIP has evolved to include five programs per year, three with the original intent of educating small veteran owned businesses while a new one was created for those who are launching their businesses and another called “VIP 5.0” for those who have already attended the

original class. VIP enrollment is open to the owner, principal or C-level executive for a veteran-owned business.

REAL-WORLD EXPERTISE

Like Houk, **Raymond Jardine Jr.**, feels the expert instructors is one aspect that makes VIP so unique.

Jardine is the owner of Native Hawaiian Veterans, LLC, a company that specializes in homeland security, emergency management and emergency management solutions.

“The approach of using business leaders to teach makes it so much more than just an academic program. I came out of there so much smarter on not only what to do, but what not to do,” he said.

The Army veteran founded his company in 2005 and attended VIP four years ago. The information helped him build his business as well as become a better mentor to his own employees and other veteran business owners that he counsels in Hawaii where he lives. ►

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— **Raymond Jardine, Jr.**