

## Tom Bethel

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**From:** Dana McDowell  
**Sent:** Wednesday, April 3, 2019 9:06 AM  
**To:** Brian Wilke; Tom Bethel  
**Subject:** My Letter to the VA

To Whom It May Concern,

My experience as a veteran student at the Oregon Culinary Institute was amazing. I was mentored by the most honorable and knowledgeable instructors and the impact it made on my professional life has opened me up to a wide variety of career paths. I went in with the intention to be a cake designer and ended up in love with the management classes that taught me skills which enhance every aspect of my life. I learned the fine details of internal and external customer service that feeds into a healthy machine we all call work. I dove deep into the abyss of Microsoft Excel and found my love for formulas and charts. I became a businesswoman and I shined so bright that OCI's president Brian Wilke and the Director of Education Tom Bethel invited me to be on their team as the VA School Certifying Official and Registrar.

Since being a part of the team, I have gained a respect for education that I would not have learned as a student. Essentially, being the liver of the company has given me a new perspective and knowledge on how the wheels turn in the education world. In my experience as the VA official, I have become a guide, a safe zone and a sounding board for all the veterans who choose OCI. A lot of our vets come straight out of service searching for the structure and commanding field culinary arts has to offer. Having been molded into what our country needs and dependent upon the chain of command can create a difficult transition into the civilian world. I make a strong effort to be the bridge between the inside and the outside so that our veterans feel welcome, heard and understood. It is especially difficult to feel accepted in the Pacific North West, when some folks mistake the Coast Guard for the Color Guard merely because they choose to be that disconnected.

As a veteran student I felt equal opportunity to those around me. I was treated with respect, assisted when I needed aid, and given the appropriate amount of attention that should be (and is) distributed to all students.

As an alumni/employee, I have only ever seen and given the best customer service every student deserves, no matter their lifestyle, career paths, or history. Every person deserves equal opportunity and respect.

My experience at the Oregon Culinary Institute has been life changing, and I am forever grateful to everyone who has taught, mentored and led me.

Sincerely,

Dana McDowell  
USAF Veteran  
Registrar & VA SCO of the Oregon Culinary Institute



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To whom it may concern:

My name is Sean Thomas Kerchner. I am a graduate of Oregon Culinary Institute (OCI). Throughout my career as a professional cook, sous chef, executive chef, now Chef Instructor, I have drawn on my education from OCI daily. The staff, facility and program are unmatched by ANY. I have attended three culinary institutes as I progressed through my career, achieving my Master's Degree in International Hospitality Management. After attending, Stratford University, Johnson and Wales and Oregon Culinary Institute, I gained the experience and skills to swiftly climb the ladder to my position as Chef Instructor at Thomas Edison High School of Technology.

Recently it has come to my attention that new proposals to restrict or disqualify Military Service Members and Veterans from using THEIR EARNED educational funds to attend Oregon Culinary Institute. As a combat disabled veteran, an OCI alumni, a proud retired Aviation Ordnanceman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Petty Officer of the United States Navy and now a Chef instructor, SHAME on you.

First, the funds for schooling are not to be restricted by any state or local government. These are federal funds earned by service members. I personally spent my early 20's doing a job (for your freedom) that did not have a career path in the civilian world. I found myself searching for a career that had the same level of comradery, a team environment and high demand that I had while active duty. I quickly fell in love the Professional Kitchen. Passing any law or legislation that restricts the use of Montgomery GI bill funds for a technical institute or college is absurd. As a Certified Technical Educator in this field it is our responsibility to give students a path to a career OR college. Culinary Institutes such as OCI give students the skills and knowledge that make them versatile and successful in this industry with minimal training from employer to employer. Making a law to restrict that for military members or GI Bill funded students is shameful. OCI prepared me to be a kitchen professional and the educational programs gave me structure and confidence in a classroom like I have never had before. So much so I continued on to earn my Master's Degree. So OCI has succeeded where many other schools were unable, providing me and many other students with the classroom skill and confidence to continue to additional degrees.

I ask that you take my voice into consideration when making a decision that will no doubt affect me and my brothers and sisters of the Armed Forces. I spoke so highly of the community of Portland, OR, the State of Oregon and the progressive and positive future that is constantly on display in your great state. In the Military we have many sayings, one comes to mind here. "If it isn't broken, don't fix it!"

Very Respectfully, yet ashamed,

**Sean T. Kerchner**

Chef Instructor

Thomas Edison High School of Technology

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My experience at OCI was one of the best times of my life. The environment created by the faculty borders on family, but maintains strict academic standards and challenges students to be there best. OCI does such a great job of introducing students to the food culture and many restaurants as well as Portland's local agriculture. The opportunities created by the school's involvement in the community are endless.

The value that this incredible school adds to the city of Portland is one that is both immeasurable and a perfect example of how one great idea can go on to inspire so many. To Brian Wilke, Christian Haldeman and Tom Bethel, thank you for so much for sharing your passion. I promise to return the favor!

Casey Brown

## Tom Bethel

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**From:** Gregory Hightower <ghightower70@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Monday, April 1, 2019 10:08 AM  
**To:** Tom Bethel  
**Subject:** VA student experiences

Hi Tom,

Here are some notes on my experience at Oregon Culinary Institute. As you probably are aware I must of liked it because I kept coming back for more.

I first attended OCI in January 2014 in the Culinary Diploma Program. In December of 2013 I had unexpected major surgery, but on advise of my surgeon ,I decided not to delay my attendance at OCI. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The first class Culinary 111 vaguely reminded me of my Army Basic Training from the mid 1970's and Bikram Vaidya really reminded me of my first Drill Instructor of that era. I really would not have made it through that first class without the help and support of the facility/staff of OCI. My fellow students were also very supportive and one of the things I really really like about OCI is providing a sense of camaraderie. An atmosphere I had not experienced since leaving the service.

There are many things I like about OCI. I believe I got a quality education in both the Baking/Pastry and Culinary Arts. Both programs gave me the tools and knowledge to have the confidence to do things I had never done before. I like the fact that the institute uses the crawl, walk, run method of learning just like the Army does. But most of all I like the caring, friendly, supportive nature of the faculty and staff. An example of this was when I had to take a break from school to get a variety of tests at the M D Anderson Cancer Center In Houston, Tx. The then Director of Education, Christian Haldeman. telephoned me several times to see how I was doing . That really meant a lot to me and was reflective of the general nature of majority of the facility/staff I've dealt with at OCI. (How does Chef Wilke memorize all those names?) The administration always facilitated my changing attendance dates and was always accommodating to my personal needs which I really appreciate.

So that is it in a nutshell. My time at OCI will always bring fond memories.

Hope this fits the bill for what you were looking for.

Cheers,  
Greg

Gregory L. Hightower  
Lieutenant Colonel, Military Police Corps (Ret)  
United States Army

## Tom Bethel

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**To:** Brian Wilke  
**Subject:** FW: My experience as a veteran at OCI

-----Original Message-----

From: Brandon Bell [mailto:brandonbell058@yahoo.com]  
Sent: Tuesday, April 2, 2019 6:06 PM  
To: Tom Bethel <Tom.Bethel@pioneerpacific.edu>  
Subject: My experience as a veteran at OCI

Good afternoon Tom,

I'm writing this email to let you know about my experiences as a veteran at Oregon Culinary Institute.

From the very first meeting with the administration office, I knew it was the right choice for me to attend the Pastry Arts curriculum. Everyone I met was warm and welcoming and they took their time explaining everything about the school. I felt they were very patient with me while I asked questions and concerns I had and they even treated me to a delicious lunch for free.

On day one I met all the instructors and teachers and I was blown away by the professionalism everyone demonstrated. I was given my chef pants and coats and all my books for the whole term. On that day I went home smiling and excited, anxious to start class.

Throughout the whole term I came across people who were kind and welcoming and I felt they truly enjoyed me being there with them. All three of my pastry instructors, Chef Moe, Chef Hacklander and Chef Hall were amazing to be around and great role models for inspiring pastry chefs to work towards. I learned so much in every aspect of the pastry arts field that I felt completely confident to step into any kitchen and provide delicious and beautiful pastries for the public to enjoy.

My classes with you, Laurie and Ally were very helpful in not just learning more about the whole business side of the restaurant, but also the conversations we had helped me learn to become a civilian again in a way. I was in the military for so long, I forgot how to act and behave around others who didn't live the same experience I had. Attending those classes were educational and effective in my advancement towards receiving my degree.

I loved being apart of the OCI family so much, I didn't want to leave. As soon as I learned I could enroll into the Culinary program, I didn't hesitate. My experience in the Culinary side of the school was just as enjoyable and rewarding as the pastry side. All the Culinary instructors were true professionals in every way. I continued to learn more about the life of a Chef and I continue to evolve into a civilian who could behave according amongst others.

My time at Oregon Culinary Institute was an absolute pleasure and I wouldn't trade it for the world. What I learned from everyone there, fellow students included, I will carry with me the rest of my life. I love telling everyone and I'm proud to say I am a OCI graduate and I continue to tell people to check the campus out who are interested in these fields of profession.

Tom thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping me succeed in life after my career in the military. I hope to soon one day come back and say hello to all the instructors and staff and hear about how everyone is doing.

With the highest respect,  
Brandon Bell

## Tom Bethel

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**From:** Krystal Garduno <krystalgarduno@yahoo.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, April 2, 2019 5:43 PM  
**To:** Tom Bethel  
**Subject:** OCI experience

From the first day I set foot on campus, I get the warm welcome from every staff member. Everyone made a genuine effort to know you by name and make sure you had everything you needed throughout the year. As a veteran, I had many questions and concerns about using my VA benefits and transitioning into student life. Ms. McDowell has been the ultimate resource for all things VA related. She always had answers and made sure to keep all veterans updated as changes occurred throughout the year. Using my GI Bill was a seamless experience. Attending OCI has made my transition from a active duty Army to the kitchen so easy as they have armed me with the tools, experience, and skills needed to begin a new career path. Couldn't have chosen a better school to help me gain the confidence to close the military chapter of my life and open the new culinary one!

Sent from my iPhone

My time at OCI was fun and challenging! All the instructors were great mentors with great personalities and a lot of culinary knowledge. With the training and skills I've received from OCI, I have been offered multiple culinary opportunities. I'm now a partner in wine tasting and event catering business opening summer of 2020.

As a Navy Veteran, working in a professional kitchen environment was a lot like the military environment with the teamwork, camaraderie, and a collective mission. OCI's dedicated Veteran Coordinator made using the GI Bill easy and I never had issues receiving my compensation.

I met a lot of great people at OCI and would do it all again if I could.

Larry Dunn  
USN Veteran  
Active Duty 2001-2015

To whom it may concern,

I attended OCI for the Baking and Pastry program, and the Culinary and Hospitality Management program from February 2017 - March 2019. While attending school at OCI I learned lot of valuable information that I did not know before and would not have known had I not gone to OCI. I always felt like I was at home when going to school, all the teachers knew each student by name and would greet you with a smile everyday. I feel like I learned a lot while I was attending OCI, I also felt like I learned a lot during my externships as well. I think it is a great idea to send students on externship so that they can get hands on training as well as in class.

Ashley Gregory