

## EDUCATION

# Pathways to Success

Federal programs launch promising careers



GETTY IMAGES; MADISON YEN

By Matt Alderton

**T**HE U.S. WORKFORCE IS facing a demographic disaster: By 2030, one-fifth of the total population will have reached retirement age, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, which reports that when that time comes, the nation will have more senior citizens than children for the first time in history. In the federal government, where 45 percent of employees are age 50 or

older, that portends a mass exodus of not only talent, but also institutional knowledge.

Fortunately, the feds saw this coming. In 2010, then-President Barack Obama issued an executive order establishing three Pathways Programs that allow government agencies to circumvent traditional competitive hiring practices by limiting the applicant pool for select jobs to students and recent graduates. There's the Internship Program, which offers paid intern-

ships to current students; the Recent Graduates Program, which provides entry-level employment to recent college graduates; and the Presidential Management Fellows Program for recent graduates of advanced-degree programs.

At USACE, Pathways gives participants expert-level technical skills as well as a general understanding of how USACE operates. These four rising stars share how their Pathways experiences opened doors to promising careers:



MEMPHIS, TENN., DISTRICT

## ASHLEY EVANS, CIVIL ENGINEER

Like so many in her profession, Ashley Evans first demonstrated an aptitude for engineering as a child playing with blocks.

"I had these gallon-sized containers full of Legos that I loved using to build and create things," said Evans, 28, whose childhood instincts were reaffirmed by a high school career assessment. "I didn't really know what engineering was," Evans continued. "But when I took the ACT, for the heck of it I also took a career test that they offered. Nine out of my top 10 careers came back as different types of engineering, so I decided I should look into it."

Evans studied civil engineering at the University of Memphis, where a class she took sparked an interest in hydrology and hydraulics.

"I knew USACE did a lot of hydrology and hydraulics work, so when I saw them at a College of Engineering career fair, I stopped to chat with them," said Evans, who upon graduating applied for an entry-level position in the Hydraulics and Hydrology Branch

of the USACE Memphis District. When she was hired in December 2016, she joined the Recent Graduates Program as a Department of the Army (DA) intern, commencing a two-year contract that turned into a permanent position in December 2018.

"I feel like I received a lot more support than I would have if I'd gotten a job in the private sector," explained Evans, who spent her DA internship working with an assigned mentor, attending specialized training and learning tradecraft from senior engineers. "Engineering school is a lot of theory; this was a great way to learn how to apply that theory. It was a really good transition from college to the real world."



## EDUCATION



**“Because of the two years I spent in St. Paul, I was able to arrive in Anchorage with all the knowledge I needed to do the job.”**

### KENDRA HOLMAN, BIOLOGIST

Kendra Holman was a nontraditional student looking for a nontraditional internship. That’s how she came across the Pathways Programs.

“I’m married with four kids and spent 12 years in the Navy before going to college,” said Holman, 35, who studied wildlife resources and rangeland ecology and management at the University of Idaho. “One of the requirements for graduating was having some kind of internship. I had a 3-year-old daughter, so it had to be something that paid. That’s when the Veterans Assistance Office at my college told me about the Pathways Programs.”

Holman grew up in the mountains of northern Idaho, where she developed a passion for nature. That’s what inspired her field of study — and what guided her search for Pathways internships, of which she had several. As an undergraduate, for example, she secured summer internships with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Because neither agency felt like the right fit, she took another Pathways position when she graduated, this time with USACE in its Recent Graduates Program.

During her two-year internship in the USACE St. Paul, Minn., District, she traveled to numerous field offices, experiencing various branches and projects. “That gave me the opportunity to see all the different areas of the Corps in which I qualified to work, and to decide if I wanted to work in them permanently,” said Holman, who applied for and received a permanent position in the USACE Alaska District, where she recently began working as a regulatory project manager overseeing biological evaluations of proposed wetlands projects. “Because of the two years I spent in St. Paul, I was able to arrive in Anchorage with all the knowledge I needed to do the job.”

ALASKA DISTRICT



PHOTOS BY EMILY CHAVOLLO



## EDUCATION



**“I got to work on some really cool stuff that is the envy of civil engineers everywhere, and I got to do it because of the Recent Graduates Program.”**

LOUISVILLE, KY.,  
DISTRICT



## **RYAN LAWRENCE, STRUCTURAL ENGINEER**

It's said that mothers know best. And according to Ryan Lawrence, his mother knew from the start that he'd be an engineer.

Lawrence wanted to be a police officer, then a businessman, but finally fulfilled his mother's prophecy as a high school senior when he participated in a building project during a mission trip to the Dominican Republic.

"I really enjoyed my experience down there and ... realized that engineering fit my interests a lot better than business," said Lawrence, 26. "At that point, what people had been telling me my whole life finally clicked."

Lawrence earned a bachelor's degree in civil and environmental engineering at the University of Louisville, where he also received a master's degree. While he was pursuing the latter, he inquired about positions at the USACE Louisville District.

"At that point I was working in a management-type position, and I wanted to try doing design. I could see that the Corps offered that," explained Lawrence, who joined USACE as an engineering co-op while finishing his master's degree, then transitioned into the Recent Graduates Program once he completed it. A year later he was offered a full-time position.

"For me, the biggest benefit (of the Recent Graduates Program) was mentorship and training," continued Lawrence, who trained under a senior engineer; attended a weeklong training course on hydraulic steel structures, which he continues to leverage in his current position; and created with his supervisor an Individual Development Plan that served as a road map for his future in the Corps. He even got to work on his district's signature project: the \$3.1 billion Olmsted Locks and Dam Project in Olmsted, Ill. "I got to work on some really cool stuff that is the envy of civil engineers everywhere, and I got to do it because of the Recent Graduates Program."

JACK SWEENEY/USACE; KATIE NEWTON/USACE



## EDUCATION

LOUISVILLE, KY.,  
DISTRICT

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### JESSICA ZIMMER, NATURAL RESOURCES SPECIALIST

Every day feels like Sunday for Jessica Zimmer, whose mother insisted on spending weekends outdoors when she was a child.

“We used to go bird-watching, and every Sunday on a nice day we went hiking. My mom always made sure we were out at a park somewhere,” said Zimmer, 31, who is now a natural resources specialist — or park ranger — at Caesar Creek Lake, a reservoir in southwestern Ohio that is owned and operated by the USACE Louisville District.

Zimmer had always wanted to be a park ranger, but was dissuaded from applying because she’d heard that park jobs were too competitive. Instead, she joined the Army Reserves.

“I got deployed to Afghanistan a year after I graduated high school, then worked full time for the Army Reserves for three years,” Zimmer said. “Although I loved being in the military, I realized it wasn’t my passion. So I decided to go back to school and study biology.”

Zimmer studied at night and worked a private-sector job during the day. When she decided to trade the latter for a position in her field of study, she sought and obtained a summer park ranger job at Caesar Creek Lake, expecting to lose it at the end of the season. When the summer ended, however, she was invited to apply for full-time employment via the Pathways Internship Program.

“I got the internship, and it was amazing how well it aligned with my degree,” said Zimmer, who spent a year in the Pathways Program before transitioning to full-time employment in the same position, in which her duties include surveying local wildlife, running the Caesar Creek Visitors Center and providing safety education and oversight to visitors. “The Pathways Program was an amazing experience. Doing it was the best thing I’ve ever done because now I have my dream job, and I absolutely love it.”



PHOTOS BY KIM BAKER/USACE