

# Meet Doctor Milspouse

Bachelor's, master's and even Ph.D's: Military spouses are earning an impressive number of academic degrees despite the challenges of a mobile lifestyle.

BY MOLLY BLAKE, *Marine Corps spouse*

**E**lizabeth Pearsall is a self-described geek. "I love learning how drugs work in the body," says Pearsall, whose office walls were already adorned with two important degrees (a bachelor's degree and master's degree in biochemistry) when the Air Force spouse decided to pursue a doctorate in medicinal biochemistry at UNC-Greensboro.



Pearsall is part of an impressive cadre of spouses with master's degrees, doctorates or other professional degrees. According to the Military Family Life Project, 10 percent of military spouses report having a master's degree, MBA or similar professional degree. It's almost equal to what the Census Bureau reports for all Americans—proving that military spouses, who often face geographic interruptions and deployments, still manage to earn higher education degrees at about the same pace as civilians.

## WHY THEY DO IT

Motivations may differ. But much of what drives spouses to school is simple economics: The Department of Defense reports that 85 percent of military spouses need to work to help support their families financially. And yet for others, like **Vivian Greentree**, choosing to go after a doctorate is also about helping others.

"My degree has given me the ability to have impact through my research," says Greentree, who currently serves as research and policy director for Blue Star Families. "It has opened up so many opportunities to serve and help be part of the solutions in our military community."

The same goes for Pearsall (who is currently researching ways to make a particular medical drug more effective and less likely to cause side effects) and for May Zeidan-Lukacs, a Ph.D. in counseling, marriage and family therapy who has done research on PTS, military families and clinician burnout.

## MAKING IT WORK

Completing a Ph.D. program is rigorous work. Besides course work, internships and research, most doctoral programs require students to write a dissertation. This massive body of work contributes new research or scholarship to a particular field and proves the candidate is worthy of being called "doctor."

**Megan Greenwald-Yarnell**, a neuroscience Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan, was in school while her husband was stationed in another state. Maintaining two households was a financial challenge for her family and "the physical separation is quite simply emotionally draining," she says. But she and her spouse prepared for the challenge and they encourage other military couples to do the same.

## MILSPOUSE EDUCATION STATS

Here's a snapshot of education levels among America's military spouses:

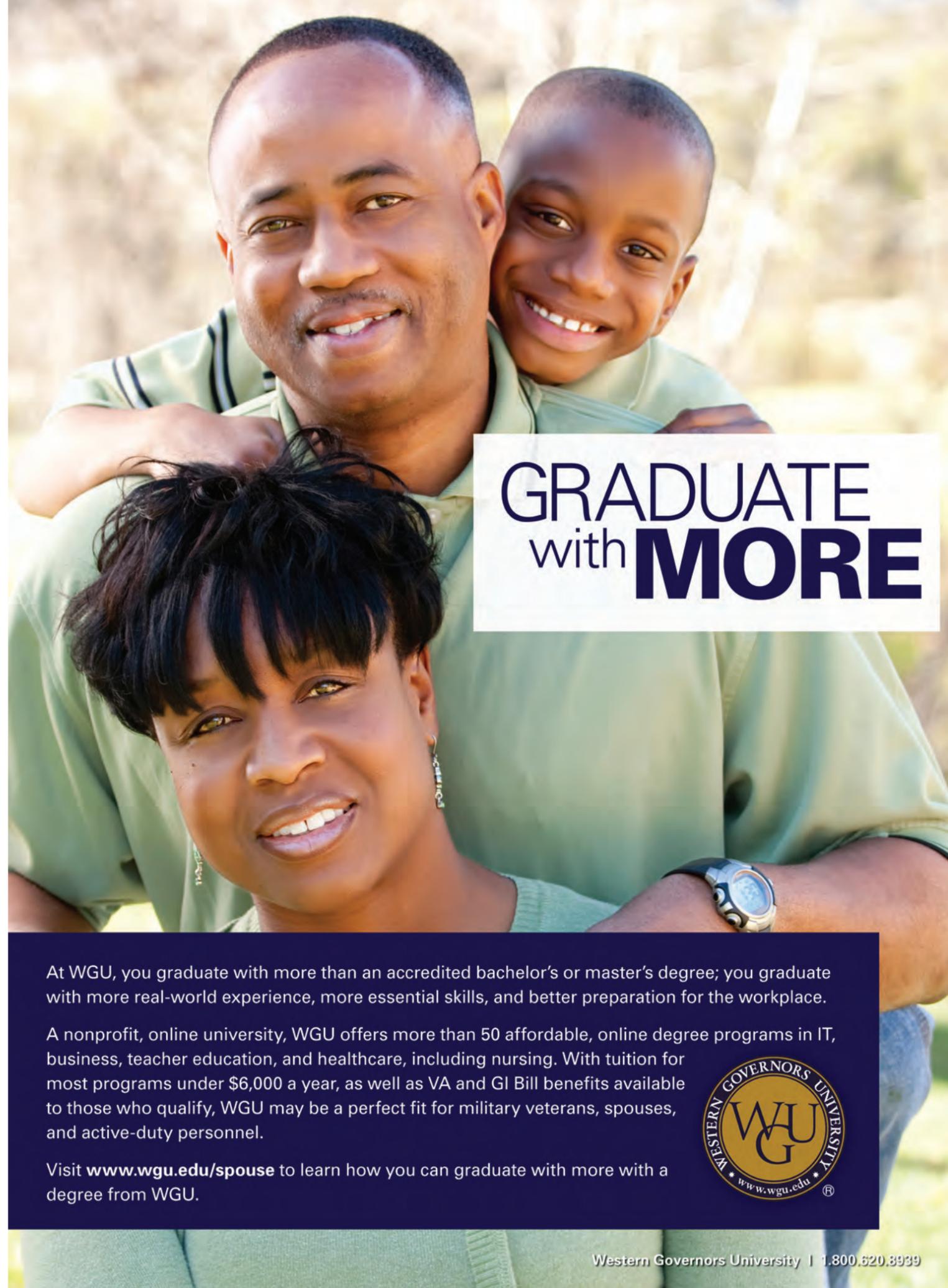
- 10% have earned a master's, doctoral or professional degree
- 25% have earned a bachelor's degree
- 14% have earned an associate's degree
- 22% have completed one or more years of college, but have not yet completed a degree
- 13% have completed some college credit, but less than one year
- 14% have earned a high school diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- 2% have completed 12 years or less of school (no high school diploma yet)

Source: 2010 Military Family Life Project, DMDC

"There will inevitably be bumps in the road," says Greenwald-Yarnell. "It helps to have some discussions ahead of time about what you'll do when they are encountered."

Pearsall agrees: "Go into it with your eyes wide open."

It can help to focus on the achievement that lies ahead. Despite the grueling schedule, "I'm immensely proud of the fact that I'm earning this degree," says Greenwald-Yarnell. "And no one can take that away." ★



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