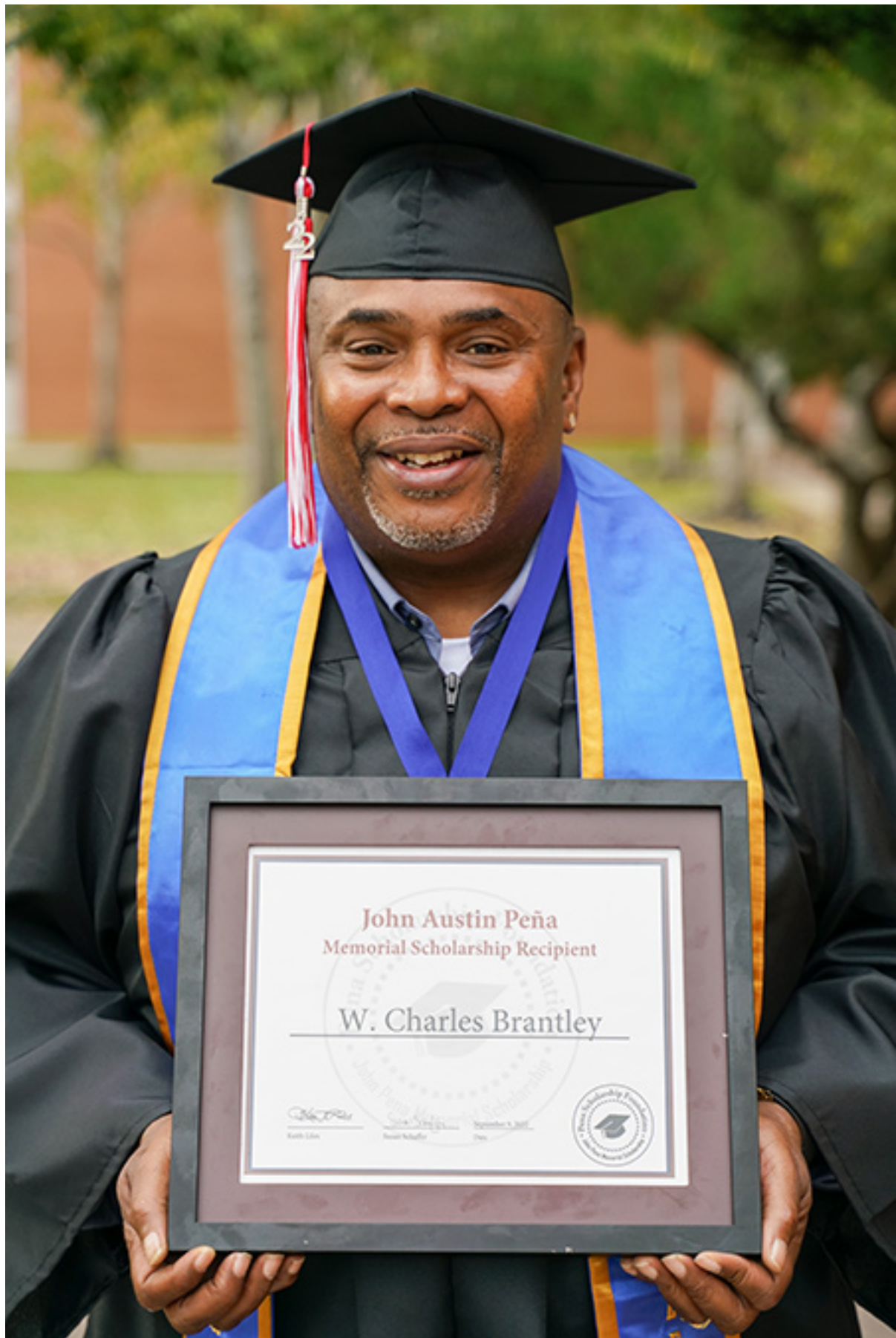


Recovery Mission: Student, Navy Vet Earns Addiction Counseling Degree

Charles Brantley can tell you firsthand what it is like to hit rock bottom and how it feels to rise to the top.

The Gulf War Navy veteran spent four years fighting on the front lines during Operation Desert Storm, but when he returned home to the states, Brantley faced a new battle — one with substance abuse.



had a lot of issues that I hadn't yet confronted, so I used alcohol and drugs to deal with

them," he shared. "I was alienated from my family. I was homeless at one point. It was a horrible, dark time in my life."

But Brantley says he is not ashamed about his past because it made him who he is today: A 54-year-old Lee College student, who just celebrated seven years of sobriety and is graduating this month with an Associate of Applied Science in Addiction Counseling.

"Thank goodness for recovery and the 12-Step Program and strangers who helped me," said Brantley, Class of 2022. "They saw me at my lowest point and offered me a hand up and some hope."

Once he knew he was "free from the bondage of addiction," Brantley realized that if he was going to dedicate his life to helping others get well, he would have to go to school. In 2019, he enrolled at Lee College. That is where he met Reanna DeGeorge, instructor in the college's Drug and Alcohol Counseling program. DeGeorge, who is also in recovery and 16 years sober, recalled one of her first interactions with Brantley. It was at the beginning of COVID-19 and face-to-face courses had switched to online learning.

"He did not know how to turn a computer on, and I remember him calling me — saying he was going to give up. But I would talk him through it and help him navigate through the feelings of the unknown," DeGeorge explained.

Despite those feelings, Brantley refused to give up and turned out to be one of DeGeorge's top students.

"Charles is a prime example of someone who has been through the trenches in terms of addiction and has come out on the other side," DeGeorge said. "He's also giving back to the community with those experiences."

Others are taking notice of Brantley's hard work as well.

He was recently awarded the John Peña Memorial Scholarship. Created in 2005 by the Texas Association of Addiction Professionals (TAAP), the scholarship honors John Peña, the son of former Texas State Representative Aaron Peña, who died at the age of 16 after he was given tainted drugs at a party. Aaron Peña is a champion of military veterans and an advocate for addiction treatment and prevention. Each year the TAAP gives out scholarships to students like Brantley who are pursuing a career in counseling. Lee College also recognized Brantley this year with a Service-Learning Award for his community service work helping individuals with substance use disorders and mental health conditions.

For the past six years, Brantley has been working in the addiction counseling field. These days, he serves as a strategic relations manager and veteran liaison at Discovery Behavioral Health. He is a licensed chemical dependency counselor intern, and after graduation, Brantley plans to use his Peña Memorial Scholarship funds to pay for the state licensure preparatory courses and exam.

"When other students are struggling, Charles is always willing to share his experience, his strength and hopes with them," DeGeorge added. "He is incredibly supportive of his fellow students. It is part of his nature, and he will be a great counselor."

In addition to DeGeorge, Brantley says other individuals instrumental in his success include Howard Bushart, division chair, Allied Health and licensed chemical dependency counselor; Rosemary Coffman, associate dean, Testing and Student Life and licensed

chemical dependency counselor and Toni Bates-Somerset, program director, Into Action Recovery Center.