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## Changemakers: Juris Doctorate: Peter Sabian L'17: Practice With A Purpose 7-15-24

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# Changemakers: Peter Sabian L'17: Practice With a Purpose

The US Army has profiled our own Peter Sabian L'17, a public defender in Washington State who is an Army Reservist in the US Army JAG Corps. Read more about this [#changemaker](#).

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# Practice with a purpose: Army Reserve Soldier honors heritage, family with legal career journey

By Jane Lee The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. –

“I joined the U.S. Army Reserve because I wanted to challenge myself and make my father proud who pushed me to join for a long time,” said 1st Lt. Peter Sabian. “My father served as a lieutenant in the Soviet Army and Soviet Air Force. He was a tail gunner in spy planes during the Cold War. In 1998, he left for Yugoslavia with the Ukrainian contingent to be a peacekeeper with the United Nations because he knew several languages. He lived in Kosovo for a little more than a year and worked as an interpreter and instructor before he came to the U.S. where he successfully claimed political asylum.”

The 224th Officer Basic Course student at the Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School immigrated to the United States when he was 16 years old. Living in Brooklyn was quite a culture shock after growing up in Kharkiv, the second-largest city in Ukraine.

“We lived in poverty because Ukraine was going through a rough time after the collapse of the Soviet Union,” said Sabian. “We did not always have enough food to eat. My parents would often get paid with vegetables, such as bags of potatoes, instead of actual currency. Once they got ‘paid’ with a bag of flour.”

Even though both of Sabian’s parents worked, his father as a police detective and his mother as a lab technologist, they often lived in communal homes where several families shared one bathroom. “We did not have hot running water until early 2000’s. To bathe, we had to boil water on the stove,” recalled Sabian. “We had electricity rationing where electricity would get shut off for several hours every day. So, I had to do homework by candlelight.”

The lack of infrastructure made life hard. “It seemed that everyone was angry, hungry, and resentful of one another,” said Sabian. “Winters were brutal and summers were short. Springs were cold and the autumns were dark with sleet.”

In 2003, Sabian and his mother joined his father in the Big Apple. “I did not miss Ukraine at all. I was happy to leave my old life behind, even though it meant leaving all of my relatives behind,” said Sabian. “It was quite an adjustment. It took a few ‘English as a Second Language’ (ESL) classes to learn English. We had police officers patrol the streets outside of school, we had security guards, security cameras, and metal detectors. The school was comprised of at least 50% Black students ... the school also had a good chunk of students from China, Mexico, Puerto Rico, India, Eastern Europe, India, Bangladesh, Russia, and Pakistan.

“To this day, I believe that my exposure to such a mixture of cultures was extremely beneficial in shaping my personality and worldview.”

After graduating high school at age 19, Sabian enrolled at Hunter College, the largest senior college in the City University of New York (CUNY) to study political science. “I wished to understand the American form of government,” said Sabian. “It was one of the few subjects that interested me besides history.

“It took me about 6.5 years to graduate because I was working full time as a personal injury paralegal from 2008 to 2014. I worked in the day and went to school in the evening. By the time I came home after evening classes, I barely had any energy to do anything. Frequently, I would fall asleep on the train, miss my stop, and wake up at the train depot.”

Sabian earned his citizenship in 2011 and his bachelor’s degree in 2013. Ironically, the life-long public defender was actively discouraged from becoming a lawyer, despite his years of experience in the legal field. “My college guidance counselor told me that I would not be accepted into any law school because my GPA was not high enough,” said Sabian. “She told me that I should not even bother applying.”

Thankfully for the JAG Corps Sabian did not listen. He graduated from Rhode Island’s Roger Williams School of Law in 2017. “I was hoping to practice torts but then quickly found out that

criminal defense and civil rights was my passion,” said Sabian. “I loved working in legal services and providing for the indigent population in Florida after law school. Then I moved to New Mexico to work as a public defender. I have tried 46 criminal cases, mostly felonies. Out of those, about a third resulted in an acquittal, hung jury or split verdict.”

Graduating as a paralegal specialist from Advanced Individual Training (AIT) in July 2022 was bittersweet. Sabian was stationed at Ft. Gregg-Adams when his father died unexpectedly of lung cancer. “He was diagnosed with it a few days into my training and he passed away two weeks before graduation,” said Sabian. “The cancer came out of nowhere even though he was only 57 years old.”

Now a public defender in Washington state, Sabian decided to honor his father’s legacy by pursuing a master’s degree in public administration at Evergreen State College in Olympia. “As part of the grieving process, I felt like I had to keep myself busier than usual ... that’s the main catalyst why I applied to the program,” said Sabian. “I am expected to graduate in early 2026. I’d like to continue working in the public service/government sector ... to work on poverty alleviation and ensuring that we have a responsible and transparent government.”

Unfortunately, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is an especially poignant reminder why Sabian joined the JAG Corps. “I was in my fifth day of basic training when Putin invaded Ukraine. Drill sergeants gave me five minutes to call my maternal grandmother to make sure she was okay. My paternal grandma fled after the invasion and settled in Serbia, but she succumbed a few weeks after my father died.” said Sabian. “My aunt and uncle fled before their apartment caught an artillery shell and burned down. My other cousin still lives in Kharkiv. He is an engineer, and he rebuilds buildings that are damaged by Russian explosions.

“Serving in the U.S. Army has been beyond rewarding for me, especially because of all the American aid that Ukraine has been getting. I feel that on some level, by serving the U.S. Army, I am giving back to Ukraine.”