From war to science paradise

Waiting for the sun to rise over the mountains on the Big Island of Hawaii, botany graduate student Gerry Cobian readies for his day’s work, collecting plant leaves. When he gets the samples back to the lab, at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, in Honolulu, he’ll study the fungi that live inside those leaves, investigating their diversity and community dynamics. Now though, in the forest, he soaks in the peaceful beauty. “It’s amazing,” he says. “You couldn’t ask for a better place to be alone.”

Cobian hasn’t always worked in such idyllic surroundings. He was a U.S. Marine from 2000 to 2004, a machine gunner in the force that invaded Iraq and marched on to Baghdad. He enlisted after finishing high school because at the time, he says, “I had no idea what to do with my life.” During his childhood he moved around California—Los Angeles, Santa Ana, Chico—playing baseball and romping outside with friends. He spent summers on his grandparents’ farm in rural Mexico, milking cows, planting corn, and playing soccer. He did well in school but was never excited about science, and his interest in schoolwork waned as he got older. “My main objective in high school was skateboarding,” he says.

His father pushed him to go to college, but Cobian “didn’t see it as that important at the time.” Instead, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and did two Iraq tours. During his service, he decided he should continue his education when he went home, but “I was kind of scared when I first came out,” he says. “I was 22, and I thought I was too old to go to school.” Instead, he worked construction.

A few years later, he took his sister, 6 years his junior, to her college orientation. That trip convinced him to follow her. He started community college, studying economics. He transferred to the University of California (UC), Berkeley, took a biology class, and “just fell in love with how life works,” he says. “The part that got me was the life cycles,” particularly of plants and fungi, which are so diverse and different from those of animals.

He faced a difficult choice: Stick with economics or start college over. His family encouraged him to stay on the economics track because he had already invested so much work and time, but he followed his heart instead. He went back to community college for the biology prerequisites and completed his UC Berkeley degree in genetics and plant biology. His research on fungus ecology and evolution inspired him to go to graduate school. His goal: to become a professor and run his own lab.

He got married as he was finishing up at UC Berkeley. Now he has a 2-year-old daughter; another child is on the way. He works hard to balance work and family life, in part because of his own childhood experience. His parents split up before he was a year old, and he lived with his father for most of his childhood. They didn’t see each other much, though, because his dad was always working: driving trucks, doing body work on cars, installing kitchens for restaurants. He appreciates the work ethic that his father instilled in him—he describes his family members as “probably the hardest working people I know”—but he wants his daughter’s childhood to be different.

“I’m grateful for what my dad gave me, but I want to have a presence at home,” he says—so he leaves the house before his family wakes so that he can be home before dinner. When he travels from Honolulu to the Big Island for fieldwork, his family usually goes along. The balance isn’t always ideal—this semester, for example, he was studying for his comprehensive exams and couldn’t spend as much time with his family as he wanted to—but he thinks he has much to look forward to. “It’s a sacrifice for now, but if this is what I want to do, I have to make the sacrifice.” It doesn’t hurt that, for now at least, he gets to make it in Hawaii.

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