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THE NEEDIEST CASES

New Hope for Starting a Career in Civilian Clothes

By JENNIFER MASCIA



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Sheyla Pion was an Army reservist at 17, but recently needed help outfitting herself for a job.

Sheyla Pion was 17 when she decided to join the Army Reserve. But since she was a minor, her mother had to approve. Knowing that her mother would never consent, she gave her the form to sign without revealing what it was.

“She thought it was homework,” said Ms. Pion, now 26, adding that her mother cried when she realized what she had unwittingly signed.

Ms. Pion has always charted her own course. She graduated from high school at 16, with hopes of joining the [F.B.I.](#) When she discovered that the minimum age requirement was 23, she turned to the military. And when the military gave her a paltry sum toward her college tuition, she joined a movement that sent her to Washington to advocate for a change in policy.

“I’m getting \$400 for tuition and \$350 for books — and I’ve been deployed?” she asked rhetorically.

After training at Fort Totten in Queens, Ms. Pion was sent to Germany, and then to Kuwait. Since she was a personnel administration specialist, she expected to be offering clerical support far from the front lines, but she ended up doing triage in a hospital in Kuwait. Though she remained a safe distance from the most dangerous combat areas, “it was not a vacation,” she said.

Throughout her training and deployment she intermittently attended [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#), earning a bachelor's degree in criminology and [forensic](#) psychology. When her time with the Reserve was up, she was old enough for the F.B.I., but she had changed her mind: She had fallen in love. She and her fiancé plan to marry next year.

Entering the work force did not go so well.

“In the beginning I was really picky,” she said. “But I wasn’t getting one hit, so I lowered my standards: ‘I could be a secretary.’ Then it became, ‘I could work at McDonald’s.’ ”

In March, she spotted an advertisement for the [East River Development Alliance](#), or ERDA, a job training program and partner agency of the Community Service Society of New York, one of the seven beneficiary agencies of the [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#). “I thought, ‘Who the heck is ERDA? I want to talk her!’ ” she said.

In some ways, Ms. Pion is worldly: For the last seven years she has lived with her mother and younger sister in New York City’s largest public housing complex, the Queensbridge Houses in Long Island City; and she has been to war. But in other ways she is decidedly unsophisticated. For example, when it comes to fashion, she pleads ignorance.

“She said: ‘Nancy, you have to come shopping with me. I don’t know anything about clothes,’ ” said Nancy Neri, the case manager specialist at the Community Service Society who took Ms. Pion to the Queens Center Mall.

With about \$300 from the Neediest Cases Fund, Ms. Neri helped Ms. Pion start a business wardrobe and get a [MetroCard](#) to cover her commuting costs until her first paycheck. When it came to job interviewing, Ms. Pion was also a neophyte. “I’ve been in the military since I was a teenager,” she said.

So ERDA helped prepare her, teaching her how to present herself and introducing her to proper post-interview etiquette, like sending thank-you notes. In fact, she said she suspected that a thank-you letter she wrote in the summer helped her get a temporary job days later at a federal agency, which she is prohibited from identifying.

Ms. Pion’s job would net her a salary of \$42,837 a year, but her term of employment expires in August. She was recently passed over for a permanent position, but she plans to reapply.

“I’m just going to do my best to keep hoping,” she said.