

2023 - CONGRESS TESTIMONY SPEECH

Michael Hyacinthe

U.S. Navy Seabee, Veteran

Wimage and [Has Heart], CEO/FOUNDER

Hello, honorable and esteemed committee members! My name is Michael Hyacinthe. My twin brother and I are proud to have served in the military. I served eight years as a US Navy Seabee, and my twin served 20 years as a Combat Medic in the Army. I am originally from the Bronx NY but I currently reside in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I am here today not solely because of my own abilities but because my faith has guided me here. I am here today because my parents have instilled good values, like hard work and sacrifice, for me to be here. I am here today because of my kids whose hopes and dreams for a better future have made it necessary for me to be here. And finally, I am here today because the Navy has developed me as a leader and helped me to see my full potential, providing a path for me to be here.

I come to you feeling hopeful because we remain the country with the bravest heroes who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice so that many of us can become entrepreneurs. I think about the families I have been honored to know while serving on the Casualty assistance team in New York. I remember Corporal Daane Deboer, a Grand Rapids Marine killed in Afghanistan on his first deployment. He is one of the many heroes that has inspired me to keep striving because of their great sacrifice and I will forever be in debt to them, and they will forever be a part of my story.

I separated from the military in 2005 but struggled to reintegrate and feel accepted. I drove a New York City yellow cab for two years, looking for my next mission. Like many other veterans, we come out different than when we joined. We are older. Physical disabilities or mental challenges may now be a part of our stories. Mapping out my purpose proved challenging. But fortunately, I found an opportunity to become an entrepreneur in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

My first business venture involved helping wounded veterans find healing through art. As a result of this mission, I launched a nonprofit organization called [Has Heart] to help veterans and the creative community use art for expression, connection, and healing.

My work with [Has Heart] indirectly opened the door to launching a multi-media children's company called Wimage, or words to images. Wimage started as a tool to help veterans turn words into images so they could become independent creatives. But during our testing, we saw an opportunity to help kids at an early age. So, we pivoted and began using the app to help kids improve their literacy skills and help them to become visual storytellers. But while developing the technology, we needed a kid-friendly character, so we created Wimee the loveable robot. The success of the Wimee character took us into classrooms throughout Grand Rapids. But like everywhere in America, the pandemic disrupted our work. So, we needed to find another opportunity to engage children at home. We created an online show featuring Wimee the robot

and our Wimage app. Our online show called Wimee's Words started in our basement, moved to our attic, and quickly expanded to twenty national PBS markets reaching millions of households. The success of our show helped us land a three-book deal with ZonderKids, an imprint of Harper Collins. We believe this opportunity will help Wimee to become a household name and continue to inspire the next generation of creator's, storytellers and innovators. Our first book Wimee Creates launches July 18

Like so many other veterans, my journey has been very complex and full of challenges. While I'm very fortunate to share my story, many other veterans still struggle with a lack of support, resources, and funding. Over the last century, our vets have helped to rebuild towns and communities through entrepreneurship to help make America the most successful economy in the world. But many veterans are still left unsupported or their ideas remain unheard.

To help these veterans, we would love to see organizations like AAFES, Navy Exchange, the commissary and the VA Canteens create opportunities for veteran entrepreneurs to pilot lifestyle and consumer products through their retail systems, just like other big retailers do for underserved creators. This could help veterans learn and develop a market for their products by offering a place for them to pilot their ideas. I personally would love to introduce Wimee to kids and families on military bases, so if anyone can make an introduction, I would greatly appreciate it.

Overall, we salute this body for your efforts to help veterans expand their entrepreneurial spirit. We are grateful for the Boots to Business initiative. However, more funding could go directly to veterans to seed their ideas like we have done through the Michigan Veterans Entrepreneurship Lab at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Since many veterans especially minority and female veterans, struggle with getting financial funding, we award cash prizes to our graduates through MVE. The GI BILL could also be revamped and used as a financial tool to help veterans start or launch their businesses rather than limiting the use of the fund strictly to educational programs.

Artist Vincent Van Gough once said, "If you hear a voice within you that says 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced." Like Van Gogh, we need to empower our veterans to pursue their ideas and imaginations through entrepreneurship, so that they can paint their dreams, improve their lives, and help strengthen communities all around our country. We have seen and witnessed the veteran's limitless potential and bravery. But now it's time to unleash that innovative American spirit to help our veterans.

Thank you all for your time and your consideration. I especially want to thank Congresswoman Hillary Scholten and chairman Williams, for the opportunity to be a voice for our heroes. Finally, I want to thank all who have supported me throughout my journey in New York and Grand Rapids. I would not be here without your prayers, love, and support. I am blessed and grateful. Hoorah, Seabee!!