



DEOMI

Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute
CENTER OF EXCELLENCE



DEOMI: An Experience that Lasts a Lifetime

*Story by: U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Lance Pounds, DEOMI Public Affairs
September 10, 2024*

PATRICK SPACE FORCE BASE, Fla.— The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute has a rich history that dates back to 1971, as the Defense Race Relations Institute. For more than 50 years, the institute transformed and adapted to address several contemporary challenges, like harassment, prohibited discrimination, and command climate health, solidifying its place as one of the nation's top educational institutions.

Its most recent transformation began in 2022, when the Department of Defense designated DEOMI as its premier Center of Excellence for human relations research, training, and education. As a CoE, the institute's reputation for providing data-driven products, industry-leading programs, and world-class training of Military Equal Opportunity and Equal Employment Opportunity practitioners continues to thrive throughout several communities within the DoD and the services.

On June 24, 2024, DEOMI celebrated its 53rd Anniversary. This year, the institute invited former faculty members and alumni to share in the celebration, which more than a dozen attended. Their presence offered a unique opportunity to bridge the institute's past with its present. Current faculty members were able to learn

more about DEOMI's history from those who lived it, and former faculty and alumni were able to see just how far the institute has come since they last walked its halls.

In addition to the celebration, DEOMI collected and shared testimonies from several former faculty members and alumni throughout July on social media. The hashtag DEOMI4Life, present on each testimonial post, not only served as a moniker for DEOMI as an experience that lasts a lifetime, it reconnected dozens of former faculty members and alumni throughout the month-long campaign.



During the celebration, Eugene Johnson, affectionally known as “The Godfather of DEOMI”; Robert Watts, the first Commandant to serve in DEOMI's current facility; and U.S. Air Force Col. Michelle Nash, DEOMI's current Commandant, shared the honor of cutting the cake. It was a symbolic gesture of connecting DEOMI's past with its present.

“I was there when DRRI was established,” said Eugene Johnson, one of the institute's original faculty members, after the cake cutting.

Johnson first arrived at then-Patrick Air Force Base in 1971, as a U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sergeant. Not long after that, he became the Director of Community Involvement, in part because he is from Melbourne and had ties within the local community. Johnson stated that his ties helped him quickly establish DRRI relations with key organizations in the local community, expediting the establishment of the institute's initial mission—to address racial tensions and promote equal opportunity within the U.S. military.



DEOMI's current mission is to foster cultures of excellence through learning, research, and integrated knowledge management to optimize total force readiness. Its vision is to advance an agile and inclusive force that values and develops all individuals and thrives on their contributions. Together, DEOMI's mission and vision serve as guiding principles that inspire the institute's faculty members to strive for excellence in all their endeavors, both in their current positions and beyond. Johnson is a perfect example of such inspiration.

Johnson retired as a Chief Master Sergeant in 1982, after having served the Air Force for more than 30 years. As he did in uniform, Johnson continued to champion civil rights and equal opportunity in several capacities following his retirement. He is a distinguished community leader and advocate for higher education. He has served as an advisor to multiple non-profit organizations on veterans' issues and as a trustee for several Florida colleges and institutes. He is also a 2014 Florida Veterans Hall of Fame inductee.



Johnson's devotion shows no signs of stopping any time soon. He makes a point to attend as many DEOMI-hosted graduation ceremonies as his schedule will allow. Each time he attends a graduation, he imparts some of his knowledge and skills to the next generation of leaders.

"I'm so proud to see how far the institute has come," said Johnson. "The work we started so long-ago carries on inside each student who graduates from this institute."

Since its inception, DEOMI has graduated more than 53,000 students, a milestone achievement made possible in part by the construction of the institute's current facility in April 2002. Watts, DEOMI's Commandant at that time, oversaw the construction of a single facility large enough to meet DEOMI's then-current and forecasted needs. Prior to this, the institute consisted of multiple repurposed buildings that were over 30 years old and deemed not suitable for educational purposes. The new facility officially opened its doors in January 2004.



Watts stated that being a part of the entire construction process, and being able to move in and conduct operations out of the new facility were among his most memorable moments at DEOMI. While he departed DEOMI in 2005, Watts maintains that DEOMI continued to contribute to his career successes, and he gave this advice to current and future faculty members: “Continue to focus on and be the beacon of knowledge.”



Being the beacon of knowledge, as Watts advised, is quite literally infused into DEOMI's DNA. In February 2023, the institute announced a newly designed seal to accompany its designation as a CoE. An element within this seal is the lamp of knowledge, which symbolizes a lasting passion for and commitment to academic learning. This passion and commitment is exhibited in many facets within DEOMI. For example, when the passion and commitment that DEOMI's MEO/EEO instructors exude gets absorbed by their students, that passion and commitment is passed on to the students' respective organizations. And it doesn't stop there.

Many of DEOMI's graduates, who have since departed their roles as MEO/EEO practitioners, continue practicing what they learned from DEOMI in follow-on careers and in their everyday lives. Exemplifying this continuation of practice are Anthony Wade, PhD, a 1981 Equal Opportunity Advisor Course graduate, and Gary Priolo, a 1989 EOAC graduate, both of whom attended DEOMI's anniversary celebration.

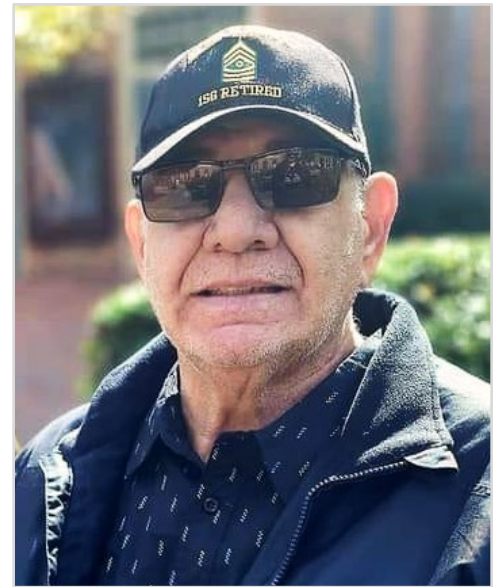


Wade expressed that his time at DEOMI profoundly shaped his professional journey, marking it as the most pivotal academic experience of his life. He came to DEOMI as he transitioned into the Social Actions Human Relations/Equal Opportunity Treatment career field in the U.S. Air Force.

“Coming from a civil rights background, I was inspired by my mother, Mamie McNeil Wade, and my cousin, Major General Joseph McNeil. DEOMI prepared me to follow their paths, equipping me with skills in executive development, investigations, public speaking, and more,” said Wade.

Wade explained that his DEOMI education prepared him for roles in North Carolina’s local government, addressing historical and contemporary community challenges, and it also enhanced his ability to train military leaders, manage human relations programs, and provide human relations consultation for organizations around the world. He added that even his doctoral research and volunteer leadership roles were deeply rooted in his DEOMI foundation.

“My successes post-retirement are built on the education I received at DEOMI,” said Wade.



Priolo stated that his DEOMI experience had a profound personal impact on his life.

“DEOMI changed my life 35 years ago and is still part of who I am to this day. I am no longer a narrow-minded kid from Bensonhurst, New York, but an open-minded adult who has respect for all mankind,” said Priolo.

Priolo came to DEOMI as an Army Sergeant First Class to fulfill a requirement needed to serve as the Equal Opportunity Advisor for the 7th Signal Brigade in Germany, in addition to his duties as a Tactical Communications Specialist and Instructor. While he had several years of training under his belt, Priolo said his DEOMI experience was comparable to that of bootcamp.

“It broke you down mentally, in a positive way, to open your mind to thinking in ways you never thought about,” described Priolo.

Priolo shared his experience with several attendees of DEOMI’s anniversary celebration, providing valuable insight to what it was like to serve as an EOA in the early 1990s.

“My advice would be to take baby steps. Not everyone is going to share the same mindset that we have. I know when I first got out there, I wanted to conquer the whole world. That doesn’t work out too well. People are resistant to change and hate to leave or change what is in their comfort zone,” said Priolo.

