

Nneka Bell '17, M.B.A. '19 has approached life, even with extraordinary challenges, with an attitude of determination and a belief that every lesson is an opportunity for growth. As a military veteran, entrepreneur and now educator, she has also tirelessly devoted volunteer hours to providing resources in the community, resources she said helped her own journey as a student at Mercy.

An unplanned pregnancy in her teenage years forced her to drop out of high school – a circumstance she refused to let define her future. With a single-minded goal of providing for herself without public assistance, she joined the Navy in 1999. She credits this decision with giving her life a new direction, helping provide a foundation for her career. While stationed on the U.S.S. Nimitz out of Norfolk, Virginia, Bell's duties of ship maintenance were crucial in the overhaul of the vessel; and provided on-the-job training to influence many of the skills she then leveraged in her future business ventures.

After her service in the Navy, Bell then worked for more than a decade as a New York City Transit Authority bus operator before ultimately deciding she wanted to work for herself. Pivoting from bus driver to entrepreneur, Bell also made the decision to go back to school. While embarking on her journey as a college student at Mercy College, is where she met Viviana DeCohen '16, MS '18, a mentor she attributes to fueling her volunteer commitment to veterans. Bell lent her talents to countless 'mommy makeovers' for veterans out of her mobile business, and in partnership with DeCohen, Bell ultimately transformed an unused office space in Mount Vernon City Hall into *Kristyn's Closet*, a vibrant resource closet for veterans. The boutique-like space, named in honor of former Commissioner and United States Airforce Veteran, Kristyn Briez Reed, continues to clothing and personal items to veterans in need.

In 2018, Bell launched her own successful construction and design company and in 2019 opened a brick-and-mortar location for *Celebrities Boutique* in Teaneck, New Jersey. Looking ahead to 2022, Bell is pivoting her business model toward a fully online platform, expanding her business' footprint to reach a more diverse customer base. During the temporary pandemic related pause of her business operations, Bell became a federal sub-contractor who supervised maintenance for veteran's hospitals, and was responsible for the hiring and oversight of 40 employees needed to ensure frontline operations medical care. With two Mercy degrees under her belt, including an M.B.A which she attributes her increased confidence as a business leader, she now teaches business classes as an adjunct professor at Metropolitan College of New York

Bell is a member of the National Association of Minority Contractors and her work with veterans earned her the 2021 *Volunteer New York Spirit Award*. Currently pursuing her doctorate at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, Bell is focusing her research project on mentorship, an element she finds crucial to the success of women of color in the business world. Her motivation to continually improve opportunities for herself and others is inspired by a desire to be an example for her family; sons, Shimel, Che, and daughter, Maddison and husband, Ernest.