

ERICK GONZALEZ
VETERAN: ARMY



A men's dormitory holds some of the 70 beds in the Shelter House's new facility in Iowa City. Fourteen of the beds are reserved for veterans. Mr. Gonzalez occupied one of these. (photo credit: Brian Ray/ The Gazette)

FROM DEPRESSION TO RENEWED PURPOSE

At 17, Erick Gonzalez volunteered for the Army. He wanted to follow his brother's example, getting away from the discipline imposed by his father and "spreading his wings." This was 1976.

Mr. Gonzalez did not go to Korea and see action during his 3 years of service, as he had hoped. Instead, he stayed in the United States for most of the 3 years, at one point being "on alert" for service in Vietnam. As a native Guatemalan, he participated in a mission to assist the country after a 1977 earthquake in which more than 20,000 people perished. Mr. Gonzalez's job focused on transportation, included loading helicopters and ensuring they had the proper fuel and ammunition. His specialty was explosives. He was also honored to be chosen to work as a driver for high-level officers.

"You Just Don't Care Any More"

On his return home, Mr. Gonzalez married and had three children. He held jobs as a truck driver and as a welder, while his wife ran a successful retail business. When his wife developed cancer and passed away, Mr. Gonzalez became depressed and started drinking heavily. He entered rehabilitation and experienced periodic "comebacks," supported by renewed faith. However, he continued to struggle to find firm footing as he gradually became homeless. "When you are depressed," he says, "you just don't care anymore." He often held responsible jobs; yet equally often, he lost them. He lost the home he had shared with his family, and when the car he was living in was towed, he lost his remaining possessions.

Mr. Gonzalez found work at Mission Hope in the Cedar Rapids Shelter, which offered him a place to stay and a chance to help others. He worked as staff, helping with cleanup and other daily tasks, and began to build a bank account. Cedar Rapids, Iowa, had little other work to offer. He also struggled not to lose his temper with other shelter residents, who often had “issues.”

Along Came a Spider...

A spider bite opened a path to a major opportunity. Sent to a clinic for medical help, Mr. Gonzalez met another patient who mentioned the HVRP. At the HVRP, he found a counselor, Kelli Hugo, who helped him find more satisfying work.

Initially, he was placed in a Compensated Work Therapy program at the Veterans Administration. HVRP then referred Mr. Gonzalez to a counselor who helped him learn anger management and gain the skills to cope with depression. He also began taking depression medication, which he found helpful.

On July 12, 2012, Mr. Gonzalez began work at Modine Manufacturing Company, which was interested in his experience as a machinist and willing to retrain him as a welder. He is still living at the shelter, but he is saving to rent an apartment closer to work. He is in touch with his children, engaged in helping them live fulfilling lives, and enjoying his grandchildren.

Success is “All About Discipline”—and Faith

Mr. Gonzalez says success is “all about discipline.” First and foremost, his life is strengthened by renewed faith and has been given greater purpose through a recent call to the ministry. It took time and effort, but at this point in time, his future looks brighter each day.

NVTAC

National Veterans Technical Assistance Center

View more NVTAC success stories at NVTAC.org