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VETS

SOLDIER RETURNED TO COLLEGE AS ADULT WITH RENEWED MISSION

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | February 6, 2024*Read time: about 3 min*

Jose Gonzalez Jr. never thought he would enroll in college as an adult. After all, he was a master sergeant in the Air Force who was married with children. With nine deployments under his belt, he was fully invested in his military career.

Then life threw an obstacle in his way, and everything changed. Gonzalez came back from a tour in Iraq with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He knew he had to get help to keep it from affecting his future and his family.

He went to see two social workers, but they were not good fits for his personality. When he sat down with a third social worker, he knew he was going to be OK, that she was the right person to help him conquer the paralyzing hold PTSD had on his life. That social worker not only successfully worked with Gonzalez to help him combat PTSD, she also changed the trajectory of his life.

"We just clicked," he said. "I had an Aha moment. It was such a sense of relief that I was not crazy. I was so thankful to have the chance to work through this.

"I owe a lot to her," he said.

After the social worker successfully guided him toward recovery, he felt strongly that he needed to do the same for other members of the military who were struggling with PTSD, often in silence.

After 24 years in uniform, Gonzalez retired in May 2013. He was ready to embark on a new mission. His goal: to become a social worker as impactful as the one who had set his life back on course.

"I really wanted to pay it forward," he said. "I wanted to help those in the same boat I was in. I knew others were dealing with it. I wanted to help out fellow vets. It gave me purpose and direction."

Gonzalez's journey began in August 2013 as a student at Thomas Nelson Community College (Now Virginia Peninsula Community College). After two years, he transferred to Christopher Newport as a social work major. Although he was 45 and older than most traditional students and even some of his professors, Gonzalez was thrilled to be on campus and studying what he was passionate about. Despite his age, he felt right at home.

"I loved it," he said. "It's a good culture they are trying to impart here. The mindset at CNU is great. Everyone is just very respectful and very cool. There is a lot of customer service."

He considered being a student his job.

"This is how I am going to support my family moving forward," said Gonzalez, who had earned an associate's degree in vehicle management early in his career. "I took it very seriously. It was a total life change."

Walking onto campus everyday brought Gonzalez joy, purpose, and optimism that he was moving in the right direction. His professors, he said, were insightful, interesting, and always willing to help and guide him. He was also able to connect with other social work students, as they were on a similar path.

"It was the right choice," said Gonzalez, who passed his love for CNU down to his daughter, Isabella, who is a freshman on campus. "I really liked being here. It's always great to come back."

As thankful as Gonzalez was for Christopher Newport, faculty was equally thankful for him and the zeal for learning he brought to the classroom. He offered a dynamic viewpoint and energy.

"Having Jose as a student gave me a new perspective on the capacity of individuals at any age to achieve and succeed; his past experience and enthusiasm for learning added such depth to class discussions and projects - I am not surprised in the least that he has gone on to make such a difference in the lives of veterans," said Dr. Diane Griffiths, director of the [Social Work Program](#).

After graduating in 2018 with his bachelor's in social work, Gonzalez continued on to Norfolk State, where he earned his Master of Social Work degree. After graduating, he was offered a job at the Hampton Veterans Affairs Medical Center. He now works as a social worker at the VA's domiciliary helping homeless vets, which is exactly the type of job he envisioned when he set out on his educational journey. He has embraced the position, as it allows him to accomplish what he had hoped to do: make lives better for vets who are struggling. Each day is different, and each vet brings his or her own set of circumstances and life experiences. Gonzalez works with them on housing, employment, addiction, and mental health, among other issues.

"I tell them 'I'm a vet. We're all vets.' Everyone is going through something," he said. "I just want to try and help them. I focus on what they need to move forward. I have a military influence when I talk to veterans. I can connect with them. I try to take a different approach. I want them to let me help them."

"I like to think I have made a difference," he said.