

## Homerun

I'm sitting in the VVA office. I'm at a correctional facility and I am inmate #1236421. I come up to the office on weekends, during my recreation time, to help out incarcerated veterans. Whether someone comes up or not, it's still my escape from the rest of the prison. I sit at a desk surrounded by pictures of military memorabilia. All military branches are represented in one way or another. There's an old chalk board where we leave messages for other VVA members. We have three well worn box fans to circulate the hot humid air. It is rather nice compared to being in the cell. Several boxes contain past military magazines that a generous veteran has donated to the organization. I always bring up a Dr. Pepper with me. I have files of VA documents to help a veteran obtain benefits while in prison. I am at ease in this office. This is where I belong.

Offender Shaw enters the room. He is a bit cautious about entering and I happily wave him in. He has only been up to the office once before. He sits down in the old chair next to my desk. He is a black man in his 60's, with glasses and tight braided hair tinged with gray that shows his age. I've only spoken to him once but I did become aware of his veteran status at a veterans ceremony, in the prison, last May. Offender Shaw is a Vietnam veteran.

He wants to request his DD-214 (military discharge). I have a veterans awards program where I'm trying to get the Vietnam vets a medal from the state and a DD-214 is needed. I'm happy to help this man out. We get through the one page document and I want to know more about how I can help this man out. I am intrigued by the stories of the Vietnam era veterans. I ask offender Shaw when he is being released? He answered that he has several more years to go. I

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asked about how long he had been down (incarcerated)? He's been in for 7 years now. I asked if he has any clothing or items when he gets out and he looked down and said " no, I don't have anything to my name". This pierced my heart but I was ready for this type response because I've heard it before.

Two months ago, there was a young Marine that was released. He didn't have anything to show for. This Marine served two tours in Iraq and was awarded the Purple Heart. He spent time in a hell hole called Falluja. I didn't have a chance to really get to know him but he was a part of my PTSD group. I found out that the deputy warden was throwing something together that he could wear out of here. I've heard stories about the institution "dressing out" guys that have nothing. Basically, clothing that don't fit, don't match, or old correctional officer pants. That didn't sit well with me. In my heart, it burned. I felt saddened that a fellow comrade of mine was leaving prison like that. I now had a mission----never again.

I wrote a local church and simply requested a set of clothing for a veteran leaving the institution. Just a set a clothing. If I could establish this it would mean the world to me. The pastor wrote back a few weeks later and his response was overwhelming. He stated that they would provide not only clothing, but personal items for veterans upon release! We have some logistics to work out but he ended the letter with "we are excited about this". I felt like I just hit a home run out of the park. I had never actually done that but if I did, this must be what it feels like: in Wrigley Stadium, it's military appreciation day, 55,000 fans with red ,white ,and blue as far as the eye can see. I hit that ball, also named despair, over that wall lined with barbed wire and out of the park. Yes, I just did that---score!

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So I told offender Shaw that he doesn't have to worry about a thing. I said "I got you". He looked at me confused so I gave him the letter, from the church, to read. He studied that short letter like he was preparing for an exam. I swear he must have read it 5 times. He said "that's your name on it"? I told him yes it was. He said that "isn't staff supposed to be doing this stuff for us"? I proudly told him that no veteran will leave this prison without clothes again! Offender Shaw had tears in the corner of his eyes. The look on his face was a mix between disbelief and relief: at the same time. He told me how he had been going to the MRP (Missouri Reentry Program) office and they hadn't been helping him. That they "faxed" something to get his records but he felt as if they were just going through the motions to look like they were doing something. He told me, in the kindest, most gentle way that I was doing a "real good thing". I welled up inside. This rush of a flurry of emotion overwhelmed all of senses. I was sad, happy, excited, and wanted to just hug this man. This feeling must be what drug users feel-I was high. Damn, I'm in prison and I was sky high. I want more of that feeling. I'm addicted to that raw emotion of satisfaction for helping my fellow man. What I once was, I am again.

I am inmate # 1236421, I made a difference in someone's life.

Shon Pernice # 1236421