

## His whole world was unreal for him

**Mike:** I'm Mike and I served in the United States Army during the Vietnam era. I became a Veteran's Rep for the State of California Employment Development Department helping Veterans find employment. I had no idea what a blessing it would be when it came to my own family and my own son. He was in the military, military Police at the Mexican border in California. People don't realize, but there's a war going on down there every day. Some of the things he saw weren't good for him. It was really a horrendous experience for him. As a result, he probably had the tendencies before he entered the military, but this was the trigger and that's when his mental illness began.

At first, it seemed like anxiety problems. He was distrustful and paranoid for sure, angry and lashing out and not really connecting to people. Then, it became more serious. He started destroying things and breaking things and he talked about self-destruction and whenever we said, "You need to take your medication..." "I don't need those," probably because he didn't understand these feelings he had and didn't have any control over them. After that, he became homeless and he went across this nation four times, twice by foot. I can't tell you as a parent what it was like to have him on the road like that and every night wondering where he was and whether he was safe or not. It was horrendous. Seeing a helicopter above and he thought that the helicopter was following him and watching everything he did. You know, he just, his whole world was unreal for him. The abnormal was normal and when things became normal and more clear, it was more frightening for him.

Finally, he was admitted to a facility on the outside of the VA. He was diagnosed with PTSD and schizophrenia and he was thrown into the lot with a lot of other mentally ill people that were a lot worse off than he was. Then and only then did he realize that, "If I don't take these meds, you know, I'm gonna be in this situation for the rest of my life." So, he started developing a history with the VA treatment and finally, it all came together for him.

Right now, he's doing really, really well. He has his own home. It built his confidence. It built his self-esteem and I'm proud of him because ultimately, he's the one that had to make the decisions. All I was doing was a cheerleader. The program that the VA has available, there's a Golden Age Games and there's the Creative Arts Festival and he's participated for a number of years and done quite well and picked up gold medals for his performance and his writing and his work and I am so proud of him for that. He did a piece with me called, "What is a Veteran?" We both did it on stage and boy, it brought down the house. My son is extremely talented and intelligent. Through all of this mess of the mental illness, this talent was able to shine through. Is Steve's mental illness over? "No." He'll be on medications the rest of his life, but personal contact with people that care about them along with medications and treatment, they're gonna have a good life.



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