

AN MARTINEZ SUCCESS

MICHAEL VIRAMONTES



MR. MICHAEL VIRAMONTES

Michael Viramontes is a 56-year-old Navy Veteran who lives in Rio Vista, California. He is single and works at the Martinez VA in Environmental Management Services (EMS). He has two children and is a grandfather. His children live in Oregon and he regularly drives up to visit them. His goal is to eventually move up to be closer to them. Fishing is Michael's big passion in life, and he goes every chance he gets. Luckily, he lives close to the bay, so he has plenty of opportunities.

However, things were not always this good for Michael. Ten years ago, he was homeless, with a dual diagnoses of drug addiction and bipolar disorder. At the time, he had recently been released from prison. He was not working and had no desire to do so. In addition, he had little contact with his children. Due to his bipolar he was receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI). But Michael is a fighter. While in the Navy he was a Seabee, a construction battalion whose



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Recovery is Working

motto is “We build We fight.” And over the next 10 years Michael would fight to build himself back-up. In that fight he received help from the Martinez VA’s Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC) and Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program. The VA would provide Michael the tools, guidance, and structure to build his recovery. And just as important, come off of SSI and obtain self-sufficiency.

Background

Michael was born in 1963 in Antioch, California where he was raised by his mom and stepfather. In 1979, at the age of 17 he joined the Navy and became a Seabee. The Navy Seabees were made famous by the John Wayne war movie from the 1940’s called “The Fighting CBs.” Michael served honorably for five years and was discharged in 1984. He married and started a family. He did mostly construction work, utilizing the skills he obtained from the service.

But Michael began to develop a drug and alcohol problem, with his drug of choice “meth.” His marriage fell apart and he began getting in trouble with the law. His wife eventually divorced him and moved up to Oregon with their children. Michael also began to experience major mood swings, which were drastically affecting his behavior. As he put it, “Sometimes I would be on a manic high for days and other time I lay in bed for weeks.” In 2006, he was diagnosed as bipolar. By 2008 he was homeless . When asked about this time, Michael said “I was just strung out. I didn’t think about the future. I just took things day by day.”

However, in 2010 Michael did start to think about the future. As a Veteran he began to take advantages of the services available to him through the Martinez Clinic. To help manage his bipolar and treat his drug addiction he began receiving services from the Behavioral Health clinic. In 2011 Michael stopped using meth. He had already stopped drinking several years prior. The following year he obtained permanent housing through HUD-VASH. And in 2013, his therapist referred him to the PRRC.

Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center

The PRRC is a daily treatment program for Veterans suffering from severe mental illnesses. The goal is to assist them live healthy, productive, and satisfying lives. They learn coping tools and strategies for managing their challenges and navigating through daily life. Veteran’s attend life skill classes, attend outings, and work one-on-one with a personal coach.

At first, Michael attended the PRRC to do something. “I just wanted to get out of the house.” But he said early on he began to learn many things he found useful. Especially in coping with his mental illness and his drug addiction. “It didn’t happen to me right away. But I paid attention and tried to learn everything I could from the classes. I found learning about mental illness to be really valuable. It helped make living with it more manageable.”

Michael began to enjoy the PRRC and started coming five days a week. He began to develop close friendships with other Veterans in the program and with the PRRC staff. His personal coach was Deborah South, a registered nurse with expertise in mental illness. “She was great my whole time there” said Michael. “We’d talked and I’d listen. When I applied what she told me, and it always worked.”

Michael also began participating in Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, a nonprofit that serves disabled Veterans. They educate them about fly fishing and take them out on outings. Michael has been on numerous outings with them. He also got other Veterans from the PRRC to come along. From his participation in the Project he picked up a new hobby—building fishing rods. Over the last few years, he has built dozens of them. He loves making them and builds them mostly for others. Some of them have even competed in fishing rod and reel competitions.

Compensated Work Therapy

In 2019 Michael was ready to go back to work. But he had significant barriers to employment. For one he had not worked in over ten years. He was bipolar, had felony, and possessed few marketable skills. He did not have access to computer, and lacked computer knowledge to conduct a job search, complete online application, or put together a resume. In addition, he wasn't even sure what he could or wanted to do. And there was also the issue of his SSI and how that would be affected by working. Fortunately, the VA has a program designed specifically for Veterans with barriers like Michael's—the Compensated Work Therapy/Supported Employment (CWT/SE) program. CWT/SE works with Veterans suffering from mental illnesses with the goal of assisting them obtain and maintain competitive employment. Staff from the PRRC referred Michael to the CWT/SE program. His enrollment into the program was quick and easy. This is because he already knew the CWT staff and they him. In Martinez, the CWT program is housed at the PRRC so there were numerous opportunities for interaction. Dennis Rojas became Michael's Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist.

One of the first things Dennis informed Michael was that if he wanted to keep receiving his SSI he could only work part-time. However, Michael was adamant that he wanted to work full-time. Dennis strongly recommended that Michael keep receiving his SSI until he obtained full-time work. However, Michael felt he no longer could receive it. "I am not taking money for doing nothing." He then did something Dennis had never seen anyone do in all his years of doing this work. Michael voluntarily took himself off of SSI.

Michael went to the Social Security office with his last SSI check and said, "I don't want to get this anymore." He said the clerk replied "Wait, I need to get my boss. No one has ever done this before." Fortunately, Michael was able to quickly obtain employment. Over the years the CWT staff had developed good relationships with the human resource staff with Environmental Management Services (EMS). They were able to assist Michael obtain employment as a housekeeper. In January of 2020, Michael began working full-time at the Martinez Clinic.

He has been there for six months and is doing great at the job. "I enjoy my work and look forward to going in every day." He said he gets along well with his boss and co-workers. Most of all he gets a lot of satisfaction. He works in the Center for Rehabilitation and Extended Care (CREC), which provides long-term medical care for Veterans who are often bed-ridden and in hospice care. "Many of them are in there for a long time. I want to make sure they're living in a clean place. That means a lot to me."

Conclusion

Things are good for Michael. He recently graduated from the PRRC. And more recently, he purchased a new truck. He said he is looking forward to driving it up to Oregon to see his children. He is also looking forward to using it for some fishing and camping trips. Michael is now successfully managing his bipolar. He no longer suffers from major manic episodes as he once did. And in regard to his drug addiction, he has nine years clean and sober and says he is committed to holding on to it. "I have no desire to use meth. Life is too good."

Michael's goal now is to be a Peer Support Specialist. He wants to give back to other Veterans like himself. "There's a lot of them out there homeless and on drugs. I know I can make a difference. I ran the streets. I know what they're going through."

According to Michael there was no single moment in his recovery where everything changed. "It was a slow process." However, he credits the support he received from the PRRC as an important part of that process. "They provided me a place to go and get better." For seven years the PRRC was a major part of his life. And from his earlier quote, "It didn't happen to me right away. But I paid attention and tried to learn everything I could from the classes." And it seems Michael not only paid attention but applied what he learned.

Dennis Rojas, M.A., Martinez Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist