



REBUILDING
LIVES
RESTORING
HOPE

HEROES THANKING HEROES

A special employment program of the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes

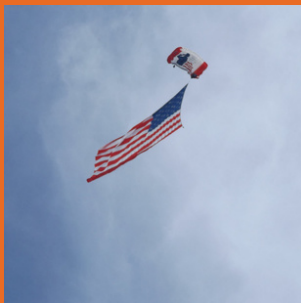
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I was born in the Cleveland western suburb of Lorain, Ohio in 1970 to Ernesto G. Cruz and Leonor G. Cruz, who came to the United States from Puerto Rico in the 1940's.



The youngest of six kids, I was nicknamed “Nati” and often called the tail. I mimicked my older brother David, who was and still is an avid sports fanatic. That lead me to love watching and playing sports. Running track, wrestling, football, and tennis. I learned drill and ceremony playing in the junior high and high school band. Upon graduation from Lorain Southview High School in 1989, I was shipped off to Boot Camp at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri. My platoon at basic was A-6-10. In my experience, basic training was easy; AIT (advanced individual training) not so much, it was like learning trigonometry.



She gave me extras! LOL. I extended my enlistment past my end of term of service while stationed at Ft. Polk in order to stay with my unit. My unit (HHC DISCOM) PCS'd (permanent change of station) to Ft. Hood, Texas. My first son was born in 1994, two months before my ETS (end of term of service) in February 1995. We had two more sons, born in 1996 and 2001. I worked in the Lorain Parks and Recreation Department and after September 11, 2001, I was employed for TSA (transportation security administration) as a screener.

My wife transferred from the Cleveland VAMC to a job at the Saginaw VAMC in 2006, so we moved to Michigan. I re-enlisted in 2007 as a 37-year-old prior service vet, so the recruiter wasn't fooling anybody; I was going to War!

Finally graduated from B Company, Fort Lee, Virginia. I Miss those excursions to Virginia Beach. After my orders came down, I was shipped off to Camp Kyle Non-Divisional unit in South Korea, Uijeongbu. I got hit with stop loss because of the Persian Gulf War. I spent 19 months in the country as a 19-year-old.

Those were the days in the vill! After my tour, I got 30 days of accrued leave and prepared to ship out to Ft. Polk, Louisiana, where I would meet my wife, Leslee, in the mess hall.



“THE COALITION HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE TO SUPPORT US IN WHATEVER WE NEED.”

-Heroes Thanking Heroes Rep, Jordan C.

I was assigned to F Company, 237 BSB, 1 of the 125. After training in North Fort Hood, Texas, we were given orders from the 37th Infantry Division and attached to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force. We flew in, choppered to the heart of the Suni Triangle, Ramadi, Iraq. The Suni insurgents hit our motor pool every other day but couldn't hit their target.

I felt very lucky until one night during a dust storm I had a vehicle accident in which I was ejected, causing a torn bicep/shoulder injury and a head injury. I was sent to the TMC (troop medical center) by our battalion medic where I was given a profile for the remainder of our deployment and for months heard the Marines taking the brunt of it guarding our FOB (forward operating base). We took mortar rounds and rocket fire every week and I will never forget rushing to the bomb shelters as the QRF (quick reactionary force) Blackhawk choppers searched the perimeter.



We left that "hell hole" in December of 2008 back to North Fort Hood for our PDHRA (post-deployment health reassessment). We were taken off Title 10 orders and returned to our National Guard unit to do monthly drills and follow up with the VA for care.

After multiple visits, my primary care physician sent me to rheumatology and finally to orthopedics where they discovered my ruptured bicep tear.

I was also diagnosed with a severe TBI (traumatic brain injury) and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

Luckily my wife guided me through the process, and she still does so that I don't miss my appointments. In 2013 I received my compensation and pension exam and a 100% total and permanent rating for my injuries. My wife had heard about a conference that was available for returning service members to help them navigate through the process of returning home from deployment.



She filled out the application and we were lucky to have received an invitation to the Road to Recovery Conference that was sponsored by the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes in 2014 at Coronado Bay, San Diego, California. I met Donny Daughenbaugh, who immediately kept me in check and told me "You don't need a rental car Cruz" LOL That event helped me reunite with other injured OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom) and OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom) vets. I was amazed by the testimonials I heard and saw of warriors with physical and mental scars, such as mine, but even worse. I felt so lucky to have survived my ordeal and wanted to help.

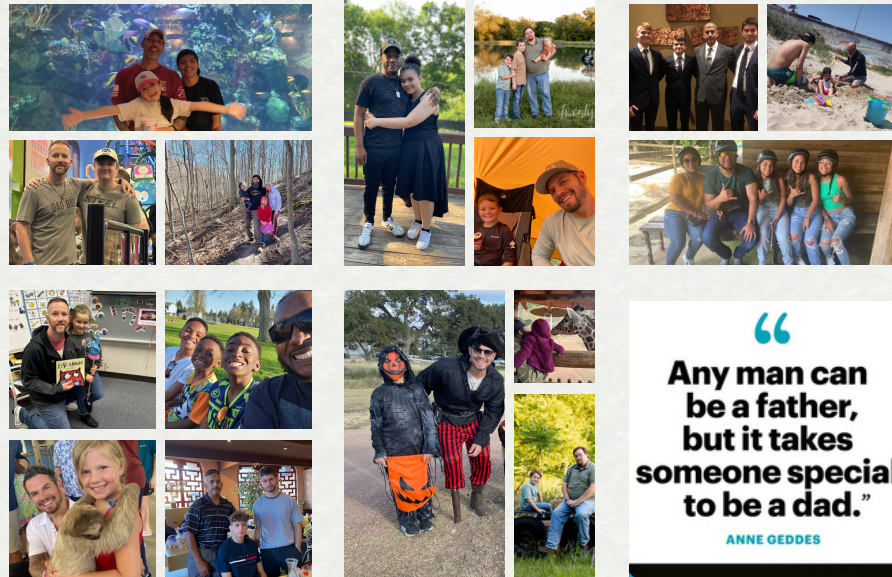
I met my fellow Team 7 comrade, Malcolm George at the Road to Recovery conference. In 2019 I met Hugo Gonzalez at the Heroes Freedom Weekend marriage retreat in Williamsburg, Virginia. He advised me that I could help out in the HTH (Heroes Thanking Heroes) program since I like to talk so much. As they say, the rest is history. Working for the Coalition has given me purpose and I'm still learning parts of the program, but with Leslee by my side, I'm sure there will be many more paragraphs to write in this soldier's story.



HAPPY FATHER'S DAY!

ACT NOW

GIVE WHAT YOU CAN TO HELP VETERAN FAMILIES AVOID HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS AND OTHER FINANCIAL CRISES.



The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that incidence of **post-traumatic stress disorder among post 9/11 veterans is about 11 to 20 out of every 100 veterans**, who served in operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The Coalition continues to serve the needs of our disabled veterans through our **vast programs of support** and connecting veterans to one another to combat the mental health crises. *Please reach out to veterans you know and help show your support.*

AMERICA'S LITTLE HELPERS

2023 SUMMER CLUBS



We hosted our first summer club this month with 8 of our youth members!

A BIG thanks to **Atomic Hobby Shop** out of Cypress, TX for their generous donation of time and for teaching our members the table top game, Dungeons and Dragons! This crowd will stick together for 4 more club dates this month.

Help us keep the fun going for our veteran's kids by [clicking this link!](#)



RETIRING YOUR BOOTS BLOG

Have you been over to our **blog** lately? There you will find hundreds of posts written by caregivers and

veterans sharing *real life* stories and advice; these words are raw and felt from the heart. You are never alone. Have you ever looked at a picture and everything you felt that day, came rushing back to you? They say "A picture says a thousand words..." Read the perspective of a caregiver/mom reflecting on a photo where so much more was going on behind the smiles you see.

Q. Why was the boy excited for summer's arrival?

A. After hearing dad jokes all winter, he couldn't wait to retaliate with some son-burns.

...made ya laugh!

EMPLOYMENT RESOURCE CENTER

- Create a profile with **Veteran Recruiting** where you can research companies, chat with recruiters, apply for jobs, attend webinars, find a mentor, video interview, and more.
- Join **VETERATI**, where thousands of Service Members, Veterans, and Military Spouses are getting free 1-hr mentorship phone calls with successful professionals.
- **FLEXJOBS** is Currently listing 29,488 jobs from 5,597 companies.
- Are you a member of the Coalition's VC or VCA program? You have access to Skillsoft! (an online platform with access to free courses.) Reach out for more information to VC Program manager, Antoinette Batchelor: abatchelor@saluteheroes.org

CONNECT WITH US ON SOCIAL MEDIA!

