

## **Restoring Our Honour from Gangs to the Garrison** *Shon Pernice*

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“Our objective here at the Missouri Veterans Program is to reduce recidivism in the veteran community by restoring our honour and means to succeed. We will accomplish this objective by providing veteran specific resources and a therapeutic environment”.

– MVP Mission Statement

Service in the United States military can develop lifelong qualities and characteristics in an individual. The main mission of the armed forces is to serve and protect its citizens so that they may live in a healthy environment. While many veterans struggle with a variety of social problems, and some end up in prison, their warrior values can be revived when a challenge becomes an opportunity. The men residing in the Veterans Wing at the Moberly Correctional Center (MCC) were posed with such a challenge when, as a last-ditch effort to help, a struggling non-veteran was assigned to their housing unit. This was a trial for the institution’s administration, the veterans, and a young man who became a product of the prison system at an early age.

While growing up, Jimmy Steps moved frequently around the neighbourhoods of Kansas City, Missouri. At the age of 14, he entered into the juvenile system and was then arrested for second-degree murder and armed criminal action at 17. By his nineteenth birthday, Steps was placed in a maximum-security prison where hardened prisoners sized him up on a daily basis.

While trying to survive in the volatile environment, he was charged with voluntary manslaughter after being attacked by another prisoner and defending his own life. For most teens in adult institutions, they become either predator or prey. As a result, Steps joined a prison gang. Although he had experimented with drugs before incarceration, he became addicted to heroin while in prison. When that was not available, he would use anything that would get him high. Steps states that, “I became a junkie in prison”. His drug use was a “coping device“ and a “way to pass the time”. Whenever drugs are involved, criminal behaviours and criminal thinking are magnified. Narcotics and gang affiliation became the main source of power, money, and enjoyment for him.

Steps arrived at MCC in the summer of 2018 due to his custody level being lowered by the prison administration. It was going to be a fresh start for Steps. However, the criminal mindset was programmed into his way

of thinking. Drug use, fights, and gang life were the tenets of his religion, purpose, and understanding of normalcy. Steps explains that, “Old habits die hard”, as he began accumulating so many conduct violations that he was going to be levelled back up to a maximum-security prison. The official reason was listed as, “Poor institutional adjustment”. However, some staff members had an ounce of hope left for Steps and wanted to try a different plan of action as a last resort – it was a plan that could potentially backfire and thereby create a disturbance among the prisoner population. In July 2021, Steps was assigned to the Missouri Veterans Program at MCC.

Now picture a six-foot tall male with prison tattoos on his face, neck, arms, and most of his body, along with a cast on his right arm from his last fight, come strolling into the most quiet and disciplined wing at the institution. Most of the veterans did not know who Steps was due to his gang association and because he had spent the last several months in administrative segregation (the hole). Fear, anger, and resentment hit many of the veterans like a tidal wave. However, some of the veterans knew Steps from the prison yard and welcomed him into their environment. This was their chance to lead by example and expose Steps to military values such as strength, honour, and professionalism, something that Steps never had as a foundation in his life. Now, the veterans had an opportunity to once again serve a member of society. They were presented with a person who would one day be released back into the community, but still needed direction and values to be set by example.

After living in a military-style environment with more rules, standards, and requirements than the rest of the prison system, it was time for me to sit down and ask Steps some questions about his experience. It had been 30 days since his arrival into the Veterans Wing and the tensions surrounding this civilian among the vets had sharply decreased. To live in the esteemed Veterans Wing, Steps had additional restrictions set by the prison administration to see if his “old habits” would reemerge. Therefore, I asked Steps how he felt on his first day in the wing and he replied, “I felt nervous about the Veterans Wing. I was thrown into an element that I knew nothing about”. Steps was required to take the two-week mandatory Orientation Class, the Core Values class, and the Colour Guard course. All residents of the Veterans Wing are required to participate in the flag raising and lowering ceremony. Steps adapted impressively to the military-style leadership positions that govern the daily operations of the wing. I inquired about how he was able to conform to this garrison-type configuration, he replied:

The structure we live by in the wing is no different than the (prison) yard. The gang affiliations have a ranking system adopted by the military. I knew who I was accountable to and who was accountable to me. But this ranking system (Veterans Wing) is for the positive, not the negative. I understand the ranking structure in the Veterans Wing and I respect it.

Since Steps was able to remain at this institution and has modified his behaviour, he is now eligible for the offender long-term drug treatment program. He is currently on the transfer list and is eagerly awaiting his next challenge. Steps described having an “awakening moment” in the Veterans Wing, which allowed him to realize that “prison is only temporary”, and that a good life is possible for him outside of these fences. He confesses that his “missing foundations in life were built upon criminality, narcotics, and misery”.

I asked Steps what he had learned so far in our wing and he admirably described how he has discovered a different type of people to emulate, ask for advice, and from whom to seek knowledge. These are men who had built a foundation while they were in the military service, a foundation that Steps missed out on. Upon concluding the interview, Steps looked at me with a grateful smile and reported that, “This was the best four weeks I’ve spent in prison”. While this second chance for Steps is still in its infancy, the experience is a validation for the veterans in the wing that reflects “You can take the man out of the military, but not the military out of the man”. Bravo Zulu! (Navy term for Good Job).

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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