

## Veteran puts leadership skills to good use in community



Jose Herrera works nights at the Mercy House shelter for homeless men.

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Jose Herrera, 27, volunteers with the Thumos Project helping veterans, and he has a paid position at Mercy House helping homeless men settle in for the night. With Thumos, he helped set up a community garden at the Brigade Boys & Girls Club, and he also helped out for a time at the local Disabled American Veterans chapter. All this while studying full-time at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

That prompted Thumos Project founder Mark Mosher to nominate Herrera for this profile.

Like Mosher, Herrera is a Marine Corps veteran, having served one tour in Iraq and two in Afghanistan.

"He's put into practice the leadership he learned," Mosher said. Those traits include integrity, loyalty, good judgment and a sense of justice, Mosher said.

Herrera can empathize with service members struggling to transition to civilian life. He experienced things in Afghanistan that can't be easily shaken off.

He grew up in a poverty stricken area of New Mexico. His parents divorced when he was 14, and his mother was dying of lung cancer while he was in high school.

"I screwed up at the end of high school," he said. He began drinking heavily.

"It was really good at disappearing," he said, adding that he cut off all connections to people.

His father had served in the Marines, and he'd always wanted to join.

Herrera entered boot camp on Nov. 26, 2006, in San Diego, training to be an infantry rifleman.

He served in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2007-2008, training Iraqi policemen on the patrol techniques used by the Marines.

After a trip back to the States, he was sent to Afghanistan in 2009.

"It was totally different," he said. "Afghanistan was very primitive, very dark."

"Dark" is a word he uses a lot when talking about Afghanistan, where one posting exposed him and his men to "IED after IED," improvised explosive devices, and ambushes by armed groups of Taliban.

He began his second tour there in 2011. When his friend Sgt. Joseph Garrison was blown apart by an IED near him on June 6, 2011 in Helmand Province, it was a pivotal event.

"When he died, my soul left. There was nothing human about me," he said.

He imagined that he would die a Marine.

"I never meant to come back," he said. "I thought I would go out guns blazing."

But Herrera left the Marines on Sept. 27, 2011.

He was based at Camp Lejeune when he met the woman who would become his fiance at New York Pizza in Wilmington.

He moved here and began seeking volunteer opportunities.

Mosher watched Herrera as he was volunteering at the annual Veterans Standdown, an event that offers services to indigent and homeless veterans.

"He just seemed to be the leader of the team," Mosher said.

Mosher asked Herrera to get involved with Thumos Project. At the time, it was developing sustainable farming techniques at a farm in Pender County.

"He took me under his wing," Herrera said. "He's become a good friend, a father figure."

Herrera is writing a book about his experiences and studies religion and psychology at [UNCW](#). He hopes to get into pastoral counseling for veterans.