

Transit Operations supervisor seeks to help homeless veterans on our doorstep

As a GoTriangle Transit Operations supervisor, Ernest Shannon had received several calls about someone spending nights at the Regional Transit Center when he decided to investigate one cold winter night about five years ago. When he arrived there, he found a veteran without a home.



Rather than chase him off, Shannon, whom his co-workers affectionately call “bishop” and who himself was once homeless, decided to sit and talk to the man. What he learned set Shannon on a mission to aid male, homeless veterans in Wake County.

Shannon says the man was a homeless veteran who showed him a picture of when he was a Marine Corps sergeant. “In the photo, he looked intelligent, clean-cut and sharp,” Shannon recalls. “I got to asking, ‘Well, you know you can’t continue to spend the night here? I’m going to have to call the authorities.’ And he was like, “Well, I’m sorry, but I really ain’t got nowhere to go. I suffer from PTSD. I

just can’t seem to get it together.”

That encounter, Shannon says, touched his heart and helped sow the seeds for “Joshua’s Conquest,” a spiritual formation program he is developing for homeless male veterans without children in Wake County. Shannon is creating the program as part of his doctoral thesis at Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University and spends many Saturdays tracking down and interviewing such veterans to try to understand the roots of their homelessness. He is finding that, among other factors, many experience feelings of shame for their actions while deployed and have difficulty coping.

“A lot of times, vets were engaged in combat, and they sometimes feel that what they were ordered to do they may not agree with morally,” says Shannon, who is getting his doctorate in pastoral counseling.

“Sometimes that moral decision affects them spiritually ... they feel shame about what they have done, knowing that they had to do it, but then there’s no program that teaches them how to recover from it.”

Mark Holland, Liberty University assistant professor and Shannon’s thesis mentor, says Shannon’s research on homeless veterans has been extensive to the point of investigating how internal moral conflict caused by their wartime experiences – combined with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – often pushes them into a downward spiral leading to homelessness.

“He is crafting a spiritual formation program that will address some of these issues,” Holland says.

“Specifically, he is trying to look at how shame, moral injury and PTSD are impacting [them] and how faith and spirituality can improve those issues ... It is a really neat study that is coming from his heart, and I think when we do research, that is always a critical element.” (continued on Page 5)

Transit Operations supervisor seeks to help homeless veterans on our doorstep (continued)

Shannon named the program for Joshua, the biblical warrior famed for his conquests over many enemies, because he sees the pain these homeless veterans suffer as an enemy that can be defeated. At the core of Joshua's Conquest is Shannon's belief that God's forgiveness can heal the vets. "No matter what you've done or what you've committed, you can be set free," he says. "No sin is too great, if you confess it."

Although the program is Christian-based, it will be open to homeless veterans regardless of their beliefs, much as any student can attend a Christian university. "We're not going to rule someone out because they don't believe what I believe," Shannon says.

Ultimately, Shannon hopes to apply for a grant to set up Joshua's House, a home where vets can live while they enter the program for six months. He is prepared to help the veterans because he graduated from the Clinical Pastoral Education Program offered at UNC Rex Hospital in June and is certified as chaplain. The interfaith professional education course required him to complete 400 hours of clinical education in a hospital setting and covered how to approach people from all walks of life and belief systems.

"It really helped me a lot to understand how to engage different cultures and different beliefs ... to be understanding in dealing [with others] with love and compassion," he says.

Shannon, who has worked at GoTriangle 10 years, expects to earn his doctorate in May 2019 and hopes to have the program running by June 2020. He earned a bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership and Management, a Master of Business Administration and a master's of Divinity from Regent University. Next March, he is going on a mission trip with Liberty University to build an orphanage and to train local pastors in Rwanda.