Dinner Speech

Good evening!...

My name is Garret Jones and I am a seven year army veteran who now serves his community as an Adult Therapist, at a local non-profit community mental health agency.

They only gave me 4 minutes to speak so I will be brief, but I want to be thorough.

According to JusticeForVets website, “One in five veterans has symptoms of a mental health disorder or cognitive impairment. One in six veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom suffer from a substance use issue.” I can attest to this because I have lived both.

To give some context…

My life was in crisis! After being Diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in 2010, spending 21 months in Afghanistan, I spent the next five years socially isolating myself, drowning my pain in alcohol, and pushing my family away. Exhausted and having a hard time living in my own skin, I began to numb and self-medicate. I knew I was sick. My pride kept telling me I could get better on my own but eventually I got tired of falling on my face (sometimes literally). I separated from the U.S Military in September 2014. This abrupt change devastated the stability of my home.

Overwhelmingly stressed, feeling powerless and out of control, my behavior became even more frantic and unpredictable. With a host of toxins onboard, toxic thinking and toxic behavior, it’s safe to say–I was toxic. I made it my new mission to hide in denial. My new enemy became the people I love the most. I grew defensive towards anyone seeking to inquire about my well-being. I became aggressive and unconcerned with the consequences of my actions. Looking back, at one point my wife took our kids and stayed at a hotel for a night out of fear for their safety. The fact that I wasn’t able to see this as an indicator of a serious problem is evidence of how highly delusional I had become.

Unfortunately, yet increasingly, I was finding temporary relief at the casino. At the time, it allowed me to wear a façade and gave me a false sense of control. The reality was, it was the exact opposite. Desperate not to face this reality, one night I went to my home and demanded more money from my wife. When she refused, I became aggressive. I would not allow her to leave the house and I literally robbed her by snatching her wallet from her hands while she was holding our son, who was only 2 at the time. Eight weeks later, I was picked up on a warrant for my arrest and charged with four crimes, including two felonies.

At this point, it’s safe to say I was headed nowhere fast. And it is at this juncture that Thurston County Veterans Court Program greatly altered the course of my life. In February 2016 I entered the program.

I often credit my wife with saving my life. I mean literally saving my life. Her dedication and commitment to our family is nothing short of inspirational. With her help, and the help of the treatment team at Thurston County Veterans Court Program, I graduated Veterans Court March 4, 2018 **886 days sober** (not that I was counting).

From day one I was met with compassion and understanding. As a military veteran, the highly structured environment was familiar and welcomed. If there are any military leaders or former military leaders here tonight, you will know having accountability is paramount. The Veterans Court program understands this, and I was held accountable. And if there are any junior enlisted here tonight, you know transparency from your leadership is paramount. This program, too, understands this and they were very clear up front: “This is a two year program and it is highly structured and demanding. It will be challenging but if you are committed to making change, we are committed to helping meet those challenges.”

Individually tailored, in the two years of being in this program I completed: eight weeks of anger management; a year long domestic violence class; a 12-week parenting class, substance abuse treatment and treatment for gambling addiction. I was also encouraged to get connected to the VA and learn about veteran benefits. I engaged in ongoing counseling at the VA hospital to address and mange PTSD and sleep therapy. I learned how to recognize and mange my stress and the importance of communication. Additionally, I dual majored at Saint Martin’s University with a bachelor’s degree in psychology, and a Bachelor of Social Work. And I recently earned my master’s degree in social work from the University of Southern California.

No doubt, my life has benefited from this program. More importantly, the integrity of my family has benefited from this program. And serving people in our community as an adult mental health therapist, it’s safe to say our community has benefited from this program.

As a student of psychology, one thing we know is that humans don’t make change by throwing the book at them. Humans make change when they feel adequately supported in undertaking the arduous task of doing so. A humble thank you to the entire Veterans Court Program for being able to see me through my addictions and separate the actions from the actor. My newest mission: to provide support to as many who are ready to meet those challenges. My only enemy is myself. And I will not lose!

Thank you.