Veteran Uses Military Training in Hurricane Sandy Disaster Relief

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—Daniel de la Cruz, UHD Student and Veteran

Veterans often have a difficult time transitioning out of the armed forces and into lives that take advantage of the unique skills they learned while in the service.

With help from veteran organizations like the Lone Star Veterans Association (LSVA) and UHD’s Veterans Services office, veterans can apply their technical abilities, hard work and commitment to their communities in rewarding ways.

UHD student and veteran Daniel de la Cruz did just that when he volunteered for the LSVA Emergency Response Team, an all-volunteer group dedicated to using veterans’ valuable skills to aid communities during times of need.

Last November, the team took 15 volunteers, including de la Cruz, on a week-long trip to New Jersey to assist with disaster and medical relief for victims of Hurricane Sandy, the super storm that devastated much of the northeast in Oct. 2012.

“The trip was an amazing experience,” said de la Cruz. “It was great to be around other veterans and to use my military training to help those people when they needed it most.”

The LSVA group received additional medical training before traveling to New Jersey where they rendezvoused with Team Rubicon, another veteran-volunteer disaster relief group, which had set up operations on the East Coast several days prior.

By: Mary Ann Cozza
“Although we were supposed to provide medical support for victims, there were very few incidents that required extensive medical attention,” said de la Cruz. “This freed us up to get into the affected neighborhoods and houses and help with the actual clean up. I was really surprised to see how long it took for other organized aid groups to get into these areas. It was good that we were there.”

After working long hours during the day, de la Cruz and his team stayed in an open warehouse with 60 other volunteers, sleeping on cots and in sleeping bags overnight.

“We had to walk five or six blocks to the nearest shower and even further to do laundry,” he said. “But the locals were so appreciative of our efforts and so thankful. One man invited us to his apartment to do our laundry for free when we couldn’t find an open laundromat. He even bought us dinner.”

While the work was hard, de la Cruz calls the experience therapeutic and says he enjoyed the camaraderie with the team.

De la Cruz was in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1997 to 2002 and traveled the world on a Maritime Preposition Force vessel, a ship that transports nearly all the supplies the Marines need for initial military operations. After leaving the service, de la Cruz attended the police academy at Houston Community College, moved to his hometown of Chicago and then back to Houston, eventually working for AT&T.

He is now enrolled at UHD in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in business and serves as president of the Student Veterans Organization (SVO). He was introduced to the LSVA Emergency Response Team by Mike Records, director of the UHD Veterans Services office.

“Daniel is a natural-born leader,” Records said. “Once he found out about the SVO he wanted to get involved however he could. Because of his experience, personality and ability to motivate others, he was quickly elected to serve as the president of the organization. His service both in and out of uniform is a benefit to all.”

Records and the UHD Veterans Services office provide the University’s more than 500 veterans with assistance easing into higher education through academic and military benefits counseling, financial aid guidance and cooperative relationships with outside organizations such as the LSVA.

“LSVA takes a holistic approach in helping our returning veterans successfully transition back into society, so I make it a point to make UHD veterans aware of this great resource,” said Records, who previously served on the LSVA board of directors and is currently on the association’s advisory council.

Since returning home from New Jersey, de la Cruz says he often thinks about the East Coast and his experiences there.

“Some of the people from the trip have talked about going back,” he said. “Not to work this time, but to see how things are now. It would be a surreal experience, that’s for sure!”

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East Coast power blackout following Hurricane Sandy.