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## MISSION CONTINUES

# Helping veterans transition to everyday life

The group's mission is to empower veterans with community service projects

The group's events help veterans who struggle after returning to civilian life

Veterans are able to get together and tell their 'war stories'

BY CRYSTAL CHEW  
Special to the Miami Herald

He dreamed of becoming a doctor. He even had a job lined up at Baptist Hospital in Kendall before he completed his service for the Marine Corps in December 2006.

"I thought I was going to be fine," said Edwin Vasco González, who joined the Marines in December 2002.

Six months later, he quit his job at the hospital and he was far from fine. González was experiencing just how difficult and unnerving the shift to civilian life can be compared to the years of discipline and structure in the military.

"I was going through a lot at the time and I didn't have a lot of support," González said. "I was doing poorly psychologically and emotionally."

Like many veterans, González, 31, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He tried to find a place and sense of purpose through jobs and education. He graduated with a bachelor's degree from Florida International University, where he studied sport physiology.

"I didn't really like anything I was doing because I felt like I wasn't doing anything positive for other people," he said.

González was lost until he found Mission Continues, a national nonprofit organization based in St. Louis that aims to empower veterans through community service.

"It was something that I had been missing," said the Kendall resident, who completed a six-month fellowship for the organization.

He soon found what he was lacking by being around other veterans and doing community service



Edwin S. Vasco Gonzalez, first Miami service platoon leader for Mission Continues, listens to a speech at an event earlier this year.



Anthony Torres plants a tree at Historic Virginia Key Beach Park in August. The organization planted 1,000 trees.

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Now González is the first Miami service platoon leader for the organization. He hopes to help other South Florida veterans cope with adjusting to civilian life, while giving them the opportunity to continue to serve the public.

The organization, which has about 270 members, meets the first Saturday of each month. They host and assist with many events

and service projects.

In June, Miami's Mission Continues hosted a PTSD/Suicide Awareness Walk. "In our country, at least 22 veterans commit suicide every single day. That's almost one an hour," said Tabitha Aragon, a reactionary therapist at the Miami VA. "A lot of our platoon members focus on trying to keep that suicide rate from increasing and to hopefully bring it down."

Aragon, who has worked

they planted 1,000 trees.

For Shane Suzuki, 34, doing great things for the community with people who have a common background is important.

"I think Mission Continues is different because it's so oriented around service; we're not just getting together and telling war stories," said the Marine Corps veteran who was deployed in 2005 to Ramadi, Iraq.

"We're getting together, telling war stories, while we're doing something worthwhile in the community."

People from every branch of service participate in the organization, and they often bring their families and friends.

Stacy Roman, 30, a member of the platoon, was among those who planted trees. The Barry University student was in the Marines for 10 years and has gone through her own challenges when she came to Miami two years ago.

For her, the organization helps to bring awareness to veterans.

"Sometimes there is a bad stigma for veterans," said Roman, who is a sales representative for the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce. "We're 1 percent of America; 99 percent of America isn't going to adjust and try to understand us 1 percent. Us 1 percent has to figure out a way to adapt."

For González, Mission Continues is a platform for veterans to make lasting impact.

"We have to feel like we count for something," he said. "Which is what we try to build with the platoon. We make veterans feel like they are greater than themselves again. They are pulling for one common goal and doing something positive."

## Getting involved

For more information, visit [missioncontinues.org](http://missioncontinues.org) or contact Edwin Vasco González at [evasco@missioncontinues.org](mailto:evasco@missioncontinues.org).

for the VA for 12 years, is not a veteran but volunteers at Mission Continues because she sees the daily struggle that veterans go through.

"Transition is very hard. The way military works is so different," Aragon said. "They were in a combat zone, under high stress for months, day in and day out."

She sees many young veterans return feeling lost, lacking support and having survivor's guilt. To her, having an organization run by veterans, for veterans helps with these issues.

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SHANE SUZUKI Mission Continues

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