

Life Is Full of Rewards

"I believe life is full of rewards. Strive to do the best with what you have, and life will pay you back in many ways."

That's the philosophy of Armando Albarran of San Antonio, Texas, a man who has lived through the tragedy of war, and has overcome serious disabilities to become a professional counselor and respected member of the community.

Armando Albarran has been named the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran for 1985. He will receive the coveted award from National Commander Chad Colley at the DAV National Convention in New Orleans later this month.

Armando recalls that hot summer afternoon—August 31, 1966. It's branded on his memory.

He had moved out at daylight on a search and destroy mission with two companies of the 25th Infantry Division. They moved through an area snaked with tunnels, pock-marked with bomb craters, and frequented by the Vietcong.

"Our platoon was bringing up the rear of the first company when they ambushed us with claymores and small arms fire. I remember the explosion, being hit, and trying to get up again, but couldn't because of



At The Office—VA Counseling Psychologist Alonzo Ramirez, left, discusses a case file with Armando, who maintains an active caseload of over 200 files, in addition to traveling in excess of 1,000 miles a month.

the cross fire that was working toward the front of the company.

"I remember waking up in the Saigon hospital with a medic sitting next to me. Each time I woke up, he was there to help and reassure me.

"They read me a list of hospitals, and when they said Brooks at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, I couldn't believe it. I said, 'That's where I want to go. That's home!' That's when I knew I was on my way home."

The reality of his situation descended on him when he was in the Saigon hospital. Armando had a telephone call from his brother-in-law, and had to tell him he had lost both legs. For the first time, he realized he would be confined to a wheelchair.

At Fort Sam, he took each day one at a time. Being the youngest of seven children, there was plenty of love to see him through his ordeal. Armando remembers those times with affection, "My family played a major part in my rehabilitation. I don't think I could have made it without them."

He underwent extensive physical therapy at Brooks in preparation for the physical demands life would now place on him. There were also numerous attempts to fit him with prosthetics. All types were tried, but none worked.

In all, he spent 14 months in Brooks Hospital before being retired from the military,

and moving the few miles from the hospital to his home in San Antonio.

One man would have a lasting effect on Armando during this period, former DAV National Service Officer (NSO), Harmon A. Bardwell (now deceased). "Mr. Bardwell visited the hospital on a regular basis. I guess, you could say I got my first taste of helping people from him. He got me to help more severely disabled veterans who were in the hospital. He would take me along with him to talk to new arrivals, and I would help them write letters and things."

Armando's entry into college following his rehabilitation gave him his first real glimpse of his future as a double amputee. He recalls that some classes were on the upper floors, and friends would carry him, wheelchair and all, up and down the stairs. "I don't know what I would have done without my friends."

"Overcoming barriers became an ongoing process."

Yet he was determined to complete his education. Tasks common for most became a challenge for Armando. "Overcoming barriers became an ongoing process. I had to learn to work around them.



The Albarran Family—Posing for an informal family portrait, the Albarran family, from left, are Aimee, Tillie, Angela, Armando and Adam.

"You must voice your concerns about obstacles in the community, both as individuals and as a group. If a facility isn't accessible, I let the management know. I tell them there are many disabled people who would like to use their facility, but can't. By putting it this way, I find the reaction is positive in most cases."

Through vocational counseling provided by the VA, Armando soon realized that counseling and the law were his two main areas of interest.

After earning a bachelor's degree in education, with a minor in political science, from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Armando went to work for the Texas Rehabilitation Commission as a placement specialist. During this time, he earned his master's degree in guidance and counseling.

"I had experienced the problems others were facing, and made it my goal to make it easier for them."

Helping other disabled citizens of Texas find employment became his new career.

"I was helped, and I wanted to help others succeed as I had. I had experienced the problems others were facing, and made it my goal to make it easier for them."

While achieving that goal, Armando was promoted to counselor. His duties included diagnostic testing, providing training and placement. He worked nearly five years for the state before accepting employment with the U.S. Department of Labor in Houston as a vocational rehabilitation specialist working with injured workers.

In December 1979, Armando transferred to the San Antonio VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling Division. Today, his work includes a case load in excess of 200 active files, and nearly 1,000 miles of travel per month. He visits training sites at campuses, and helps veterans with everything from filling out forms to obtaining medical services. Helping others has become a way of life for Armando.

Over the years, Armando has come to realize that the hardest part of his job is helping disabled veterans overcome a crisis during their rehabilitation.

"A medical, family, or psychological problem can be devastating when you are trying to reach your goals," he says. "I do everything I can to help when a crisis occurs. The worst thing that can happen is not to be able to assist a veteran."

His efforts to help others have led him to believe that he has to be friends with the people he is involved with personally and professionally, "It takes time to know your

case load. It took me nearly a year to get to know my people. And you have to be friends with them. It's friends helping friends. I work with them individually, not as a group. Their problems, like my problems, are individual."

He also believes one must be active to stay healthy. "You have to be involved with life in every way possible in order to be happy," he says. "I involve myself with my family, my work, church, community, everything."

For Armando, a life member of Henry M. Hein DAV Chapter 25, it's that kind of involvement that's kept his life busy and which has resulted in numerous awards. Among them are the 1979 nomination for Outstanding Handicapped Federal Em-

ployee of the Year Award for the U.S. Department of Labor; the 1981 Outstanding Handicapped Federal Employee of the Year for the VA; the 1981 Mike D. Mireles Award, presented by the Veterans of Greater San Antonio, and the VA's 1984 Superior Performance Award.

During junior college he met and married his wife, Tillie. They were married in the tiny chapel at Brooks Hospital by the chaplain who had befriended him while he was rehabilitating. Today, Armando and Tillie are the proud parents of three children, Adam Alexander, 15, Angela Annette, 12, and Aimee Arlene, 10.

Armando Albarran, the DAV's 1985 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the year, is, indeed, reaping the rewards of life.



Armando C. Albarran, DAV Outstanding Disabled Veteran of 1985