

Arnold Shipman, U.S. Air Force Veteran

Testimony before the US Senate Veteran's Affairs Committee

My name is Arnold Shipman and I am a 49 year-old African-American male, Air Force veteran and homeless. I live in Baltimore, Maryland.

I joined the Air Force in June 1978 immediately after completing high school. My specific job assignment was as a Security Police Custom's Inspector. I went from Eglin Air Force Base in Florida to Okinawa, Japan and finally to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.

It was at Dover Air Force Base where the realities of life took a heavy toll on a then, twenty-one year old young man. Part of my job was inspecting the body bags of those who the Rev. Jim Jones murdered in Jonestown. There were women, children and babies who died in this horrible and tragic chapter of our history. Their lives had not even begun. This had a profound affect upon me.

After my military career was over, I returned to my home in Baltimore, MD. Thus began a series of menial jobs while waiting to pursue a career as a diesel mechanic. It was during this time that my life began to seriously spiral out of control.

Cocaine was becoming very popular. Several of my friends were selling cocaine. Because there was nothing else happening for me, I began selling cocaine. The money was rolling in and I thought this could make me forget my experiences at Dover AFB. I thought this could make me happy. It was a momentary respite.

Outwardly, I portrayed someone who was happy, someone who had his life together and was functioning as a normal person. Inwardly, I was a mess. Nothing fulfilled me no matter what I did.

It was at this point that I began to use drugs. Not the cocaine I had been selling, but heroin. This is a more deadly drug and it's most devastating effects soon became very apparent to me.

Now began the endless incarcerations and the increased drug use. It seems each time someone close to me died, my mother, my father, my two sisters and my brother, it only whetted my appetite for more drugs. As I reflect upon that period in my life, any excuse would have done. It was as if I was on a runaway train taking me to the darkest places of life.

It was during this time in a damp jail cell, alone, at night, by my self I remembered a place I had heard of earlier. A place called MCVET-Maryland Center for Veteran's Education and Training. A place where help could be had if one wanted it.

I thought about how life had not gone very well for me so far and anything might be better than what I was doing. Thinking I had nothing to lose and maybe, everything to gain, I decided to enter the program there and was accepted.

That was one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life. The structure which was sorely missing immediately was found. The support I needed I accepted. The guidance I sought was provided.

Since being in the program, I have begun to clean up the wreckage of my past, piece by piece and inch by inch. I am working on my Associate Degree in Radiology. I am also a part of the "Back On My Feet" running team and recently completed my first marathon which was 26.2 miles. I am in training for the annual 5k/10k MCVET race in May. In December 2009, I was featured in the national magazine "Urbanite", which focused on my training for the marathon. And now I have the opportunity of a lifetime, to address a United States Senate committee. I could not have imagined the changes my life would take.

I feel truly blessed. None of these accomplishments would have been possible for me without the MCVET program. They have provided me structure along with a positive support system which has allowed me to excel. They have helped me to address the issues which fed my addiction which I am overcoming. They have inspired me to be the best.

Many thanks go to Col. Williams and the staff at MCVET. The opportunities they provided for me, homeless veterans and other veterans in need has been unsurpassed.