

Episode 17: A Chat with Frank Hernandez, Adjunct Instructor & 26-Year Air Force Veteran

Speaker 1:

Saint Leo 360, a 360-degree overview of the Saint Leo University community.

Greg Lindberg:

Hey there, and welcome to another episode of the Saint Leo 360 podcast. Once again, this is your host, Greg Lindberg. On this episode, it's a true pleasure to be joined by Frank Hernandez, who is one of our adjunct professors here at Saint Leo University. Frank, welcome aboard.

Frank Hernandez:

Thank you so much, brother. You don't know how honored and excited I am to be here. And by the way, you have an amazing voice.

Greg Lindberg:

Thank you. I appreciate that.

Frank Hernandez:

Of course.

Greg Lindberg:

All right, so we're definitely going to dive into your background, your military background. I know you served for many years, and you've been at Saint Leo for several years now. So first off, can you just give us a quick bio about yourself, where you're from, all that good stuff.

Frank Hernandez:

Absolutely. I was born on the main streets of the South Bronx, New York City. I absolutely love New York City. As a native New Yorker, I can say bad things about New York, but if somebody that's not from there says it, I have an issue with that, like most New Yorkers. And again, I absolutely love New York, however I can never go back there to live.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Frank Hernandez:

The price is just so ridiculous. Everything is so expensive. But growing up in New York City was a wonderful experience for me. Coming from a Hispanic family, sadly, in New York City at that timeframe in the Hispanic culture, if you graduated from high school you were considered a success. And my mother dropped out of high school at the age of 14. She was in the ninth grade. And my father dropped out of high school at the age of 17. They were born in Puerto Rico, came over to the Bronx and they got married at an early age, which was not uncommon then, and education just wasn't on my radar. It wasn't something that we aspired to. If you graduated from high school, you were considered a success.

Greg Lindberg:

Hm, interesting.

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Frank Hernandez:

Interesting and sad.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah, yeah, no question.

Frank Hernandez:

But again, some of the experiences in New York City, I really believe that God has a purpose for me, and I'll tell you because my summer when I was 13 was a really rough summer. May 4th of 1973, I wanted to be an NBA star, and I tried to dunk. The only problem is, I'm Hispanic and we don't get that tall. So I jumped off a ladder to try to dunk, and I ended up breaking my arm. So as if that wasn't enough, two weeks after I had the cast taken off, my friends and I were taking a ride to Coney Island, and one of the friends dared another friend to look over the top of the train as it was moving within a tunnel. The other friend said, "No," and me, being the knucklehead that I am, was like, "Yeah, sure."

Frank Hernandez:

Went over the top for about 10 seconds. I saw a bunch of lights and it was really exciting and beautiful, and then a steel beam hit me at the top of my head going about 35 miles an hour. I fell back like I was falling into the train tracks. I would have been sliced and diced and electrocuted, and I'll never forget this guy's name, his name is Wesley Lebin, he reached out and grabbed me by my belt buckle and pulled me in. So, the reality is I shouldn't be here. I could have gotten electrocuted. I would have been cut up into little pieces.

Frank Hernandez:

Two weeks after this happened, another young man named Rocco did the same exact thing, and he fell into the train track and died. So I have to believe God had a purpose for me even from way back then.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah, wow. And I'm curious, how old were you when that occurred?

Frank Hernandez:

13. 13, and had I been listening to my mother, I never would have been there, because I shouldn't have. But you know, at 13 you think... 13 to 19, 20, you think you're invincible and you own the world...

Greg Lindberg:

Yup.

Frank Hernandez:

I find out the hard way, that's not the way it is. If not for the grace of God, I don't think I'd be here.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow. Wow, amazing.

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Frank Hernandez:

And to add a little bit more to that, I come from, like I said, a Hispanic culture, Puerto Rican, and my mother was the rock of our family. My father instilled the work ethic in me. He dropped out of high school, as I said, but at 3:00 in the morning he was up going to work, and he wouldn't get home until 4:00 or 5:00 in the evening. And reality is he'd come home to sleep to get up and do it again. And mom kept us straight, and mom was a little bit of everything for us.

Frank Hernandez:

If I wasn't home on time, she would grab my New York Yankees Thurman Munson bat, and with her robe and curlers on, she'd be in the streets hunting me down.

Greg Lindberg:

Literally.

Frank Hernandez:

Literally. And I'll never forget, the cops saw her one day walking around with a bat, and they were like, "Lady, you okay?" And she said, "I'm looking for my son," and the cops were kind of like, "Wow, we're worried about your son now." But this was my mother. She was the rock. She was the strength. She refused to let us go in any other direction than the straight path. And not that I was going down a bad path, but there were numerous options to go down that bad path, and she wanted to make sure that I didn't.

Frank Hernandez:

So I enrolled for college after I graduated from high school, but never went to a class. And like I said, the reality for us was you graduated from high school, you've done well. My sister started the move for education for my family. She went and she got her associate's degree, which has served her extremely well in New York City, she's a registered nurse. And then after we grew up, my mother went back and got her GED and then went back and got her associate's degree and had a very good career as an x-ray technician at New York University hospital.

Greg Lindberg:

Very nice.

Frank Hernandez:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And the amazing thing is, as far as the military goes, the biggest reason that I joined the military, I wish I could tell you that it was from a strong desire to serve, to protect, to defend, but the reality is that my mother told me, "You're not going down the wrong path. If you're not going to college, then you're going to the military."

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

So it was 100% really her decision. She pushed me towards it, and I joke with her and I said, "You just wanted to get rid of me, mom." So we went to see a recruiter, and again, at 19, you're just not smart

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enough to think of the real reasons you wanted to join, and we went to see a recruiter, and she spoke to the recruiter. We fell in love with this guy. To this day I can remember his name was Staff Sergeant Mohammed. We invited him to the house to eat some food with us. He came over. He sold us a bill of goods that sounded absolutely wonderful. I wasn't sold. So it worked out well.

Frank Hernandez:

To get into the military, you have to take an entrance examination. You have to pass the test and you have to process through what's called the MEPS, Military Enlistment Processing. When I got to the MEPS, it was kind of funny because the first time I went through there, I got on this guy's line... at the end I had processed through the physical, I had done everything I needed to do, and when I got to the front of the line, the guy told me, "I have to disqualify you," and I was like, "But why?" And he said, "You have a mild case of acne." I was amazed, but then it dawned on me I'm doing everything in my power to get in, they're telling me, "No," it was win-win, because I wasn't 100% sure this was what I wanted to do. So I saw an opportunity, I came home and I pitched it to the family like that. They turned me down.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

I'm not good enough. But with a smile on my face because I knew it was something I could fix. So of course they put me on a little regimen of antibiotics. I believe it was tetracycline and went back a month and a half, two months later, allowed the medicine to take its effect, and got back on the same line. Had the same result. Two months later, got back on the same line, had the same result. And for me, I was so ecstatic because I'm trying so hard, they just don't want me.

Frank Hernandez:

And the fourth time I went, I was on the same guy's line, and I looked for this guy. I got on the same line with him, and then another guy, a military person told me, "Get on the other line."

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

And I was like, "But why?" And he said, "Because it's shorter and because I just told you to." I guess that was my introduction to the military... "Because I just told you to." Of course I went to the other line, but I kept looking back at my line, the one I wanted to be in to get disapproved.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow. So you really were persistent and you kept going at it even though you had the rejection so many times.

Frank Hernandez:

And I loved the rejection. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it was out of my control because I really wasn't 100% sure that this is what I wanted to do. My mother was 100% sure this was what I wanted to do, not so much with me. And when I got to the front of this other line, the guy said, "You're good to

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go." He stamped it, checked me, and said, "You're done." So I looked at him and I said, "How about the acne?" He said, "How about the acne?" And I said, "But, wait, he turned me down three times." He said, "Well, today's your lucky day. I'm not him." I left there numb because it became a reality. Now I have to do this.

Greg Lindberg:

Right, and it finally sunk in.

Frank Hernandez:

It did. But later on in life after so many years in the military, I realized that I didn't have to do it. They don't tell you these things. You sign on the dotted line and you have up to a year to go in. But within that year, if you change your mind, you can, and there's no consequence whatsoever. I just didn't know that.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

But the reality is that mom knew best. By far, bar none, joining the military was the best decision I ever made in my life.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow, that's a powerful statement. And so which branch did you actually enlist in?

Frank Hernandez:

I went into the United States Air Force, which of all the branches is actually the baby of them. The United States Army was the first branch that was created in 1775, just as our country was being developed, and followed quickly by the Navy, and then the Marines. And then the Coast Guard was created in 1915. The Air Force came about in 1947.

Frank Hernandez:

Now, the Marines were actually born from the Navy. The Air Force was actually born from the Army. And the Coast Guard, I'm not 100% sure where they came from, but here's the running joke that military members have, and any Coast Guard people out there, I'm not trying to offend you, but when you say the branches, everybody says, "Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines." They don't count the Coast Guard as one of the branches, but the reality is that they do such an important job as far as drugs, and as far as dealing with immigration issues. It's a dangerous job. You're right on the waters, but they are definitely one of the five. And now, we just had in 1919, the Space Force created.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

And within the branches, there is such a rivalry. They give each other, they razz each other. The other branches will call the Air Force, the "Chair Force." Their running joke with members of the Marines and

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the Army, especially the infantry guys that are right there in the middle of a war is that a hardship tour for the Air Force guys is being deployed and not having cable TV.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Frank Hernandez:

Yeah, and my reply is pretty much consistent. It's, "I'm sorry you made a bad decision." But we razz each other like that. In the middle of all that razzing, the reality is that there is a closeness and a camaraderie, a brotherhood and a sisterhood within any branch of the military that is absolutely amazing.

Greg Lindberg:

And then just timeframe wise, what year did you actually enlist?

Frank Hernandez:

I can tell you the exact day, 14 May, 1979. And of course, Sergeant Mohammed was like, "Can you go tomorrow?" And I was like, "No." First, I'm getting used to the idea of actually going, but then I wanted to enjoy my last summer as a civilian. So I said, "Let's do it after Labor Day."

Greg Lindberg:

I see.

Frank Hernandez:

I wanted the whole summer off, so on the 4th of September, 1979, I actually took off to basic training.

Greg Lindberg:

Interesting. And then where did you actually go for that training?

Frank Hernandez:

Well, before I actually left, on the night of the 3rd of September, I remember, and it breaks my heart even thinking about this. My father had the foresight to know that me leaving to the military was going to change our family dynamic. We would never be together again as we had been. He knew I was never going to come back. And the night before, I remember I was looking at the window. It was about 10:00 at night, and I was just saying, "I know my life is about to change drastically."

Frank Hernandez:

Here's the thing, when you're raised in New York City, the only thing you know is New York City. I had no clue that other cities and states had different TV channels, radio stations. It was just New York City.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

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Frank Hernandez:

And my father said, "Are you sure you want to do this? If you don't want to go, don't go. I'll work it out with your mom. You'll get yourself a job, and I'll go half-half with you. We'll get you a new car." He didn't want me to leave because he knew it would never be the same in our family.

Greg Lindberg:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Frank Hernandez:

In retrospect, again, God has a purpose for everything, and God needed and wanted me to go, so I ended up going. But that just showed me the amount of love my father had for me, and that he didn't want me to leave because he would miss me. And the thing is in the Hispanic culture and in New York City, these older guys thought they were tough. My father walked down the street with his leather coat, with the collar up, with a cigarette in his mouth, they didn't look to the left, they didn't look to the right. He was a tough guy. And I saw a soft side of him.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

And that was very powerful for me. But the morning of the 4th of September 1979, we went down to the MEPS and they made sure they I was still physically qualified, hadn't gotten in trouble with the law, didn't break any bones. At 4:00 or 4:30, we boarded a plane leaving the Bronx, New York City to head to San Antonio, Texas. I had been out of New York City twice in my entire life, which was all of 19 years. We took a trip to Puerto Rico once, and we drove to Florida once. So this was something so foreign to me.

Greg Lindberg:

Right, a whole new world.

Frank Hernandez:

Whole new world. And the reality is that New York City prepared me for this whole new world, because if there's one thing about the military, it is so diverse. You have people from all walks of life, from the Midwest, from farms, and from the South Bronx. And New York City was like that. It is a melting pot. So that helped me.

Frank Hernandez:

There's a certain swagger about being from New York City. I hate to say this, people from New York think they own the world. They don't, but they have that mentality, and everything begins and ends with New York.

Greg Lindberg:

Yup.

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Frank Hernandez:

So we were supposed to be in Texas by about 7:30 or 8:00. Something happened, our flight was delayed. We did not arrive in San Antonio until 11:30, close to midnight. And as soon as we got off, here's my second taste of the military... the first one was because I told you so. We got off the plane and there was a drill instructor with a Smokey the Bear kind of hats, and he approached us, and first he gave us such a hard time for getting there so late, that we inconvenienced him. He had to wait for us until midnight and he needed his beauty sleep, and we were just screwing up his whole life.

Frank Hernandez:

And he says, "Give me four across, five deep." We looked at each other like, "What the heck did he just say?" And I'm going to tell you, at this moment, I had wished I had listened to my father, and not to my mother, because I was like... This guy was in my face so much so that as he's yelling at me, because all of us just stood there, but he picked on me because they had identified me as the leader of the group, because that's what they had said when we left the MEPS.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

So he's in my face yelling at me, so much so that his saliva was hitting me in the face. And I'm ready to cry.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

So you got this big, bad, tough kid from the South Bronx, New York ready to bawl because I was scared. And of course us not knowing anything, we just knew that we knew the system, but you don't know what you don't know.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

So we assumed, "Okay, well we got here at midnight. They're not going to bother us until about 8:00 in the morning because we need our eight hours of sleep." 5:00 in the morning, he comes in there with the top of a trashcan, the lid of a trashcan, and a bat. Brought back memories of my mother now that I think about that, the bat story.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

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Frank Hernandez:

He's beating on that trash lid waking us up saying, "Brush your teeth. Get dressed. We're going out for PT." We have no idea what the heck PT is. But we're out there on some asphalt doing sit ups, push ups, running. And here's the thing, in New York City, we know what we have. We have rats and roaches, and I accept that. In Texas, they have bugs I had never heard of in my life. So, I'm laying down doing my sit ups and there's a bug coming over, about to crawl on me, and he knew this, he saw this. And he's like, "Don't you move. You keep doing what you're doing." I'm already scared, so I was terrorized by the bug and by the drill instructor, traumatized. So that was my introduction to the Air Force.

Frank Hernandez:

But again, as I previously stated, best decision I ever made in my life. Absolutely would do it again in a heartbeat.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow. All right, so let's talk about timeline-wise, after basic training, and then where did you actually go as far as where you were stationed and any deployments as well.

Frank Hernandez:

Okay. I'm going to say first that while my mother knew these things, I didn't know these things until well after the fact. I had family members that also joined the military. Her uncle, my great uncle, two of them that served during the Korean War in the Army, and then her brother served in the Air Force right around the time of Vietnam.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, I see.

Frank Hernandez:

So that, I didn't realize then, but I was continuing a family tradition. And then when I speak to my children, now they're grown of course. They're 32 and 33, but back then, I would just tell my kids, "You need to be better than me. Every generation needs to improve. If I went in enlisted, you need to go in as an officer." And my son followed in my footsteps. I enlisted, and my son followed in my footsteps, went in as a second lieutenant in United States Air Force. And here's the amazing part about that... This is the importance of education, and the military recognizes this: in four years he was making more than it took me 26 years to make.

Frank Hernandez:

So, I'm very proud of him for doing that. And again, my children, they've taken what I said to heart. They're both amazing people. He got out of the military, which surprised me because he was closing in on 100,000 after four years, and he got out. We come from a family of service, so he left the service and the military, and now he is an Orange County sheriff in Orlando, Florida, and on the SWAT team, but he took a 50% pay cut to do this.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

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Frank Hernandez:

So we are a family of service. I had others that paved the way for me, and I didn't even realize that until after I had joined. My son went in after me. My son-in-law, and my brother-in-law also served in the military. So anyway, so 1979... and the thing about the military, and I'll touch base on this later, but they are big on making sure that they've prepared you, and that you're adequately trained to do your job.

Frank Hernandez:

So you go to basic training. From basic training, you go to tech school. Tech school is to learn the actual job you're doing. Then you have another six months to a year to do what they called upgrade training, to get you 100% qualified to do the job. So I did all of that. I went from San Antonio, Texas to Biloxi, Mississippi. Now, if you've seen My Cousin Vinny, that was me. I don't blend. From the South Bronx, New York and Biloxi, Mississippi, I had a hard time understanding what they were saying because of the heavy southern accents, and they had to think that I was the dumbest person in the world because people would speak to me, and I would say like, "Excuse me, could you say that again to me, please?" It was My Cousin Vinny in real life.

Frank Hernandez:

So, from there, they sent me to a base called Loring Air Force Base, Maine. Beautiful. As a 19-year-old, I couldn't appreciate the beauty up there. It was winter there 10 months of the year. I was eight miles from the Canadian border. When it snowed, it looked like a postcard. It was absolutely gorgeous.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

However, below zero was the norm, and with the wind chill 15, 20, 25 below zero, not uncommon. But it was gorgeous. Again, when I left there, and the amazing thing is I can tell you the day I left there. This is the impact it made on me. I left there 17 March, 1981. I arrived 2 March, 1980. Left there 17 March, 1981. Had some great experiences there. Made some great friends that I'm still in touch with to this day.

Frank Hernandez:

But a short story about my time there. Like a college student, when you get to your first base or any base. If you're living in a dormitory, one of the routines is you go get your cold cuts, your bread, your soda, your Gatorade, your drinks, whatever the case may be. At that time, I bought a milk. And it was 15, 18 below zero. Saw a little incline, trying to be the New Yorker that I was, it's a shortcut, go down this incline. What I didn't realize is that under the snow there was a sheet of ice. So I fell down, and again, as a New Yorker, you have to be really cool. You fall, even if you break a bone, you've got to pop right back up and go about your business like, "Yeah, I meant to do that."

Frank Hernandez:

My little Oscar Mayer baloney went rolling away. The milk container, because it wasn't the plastic that we have now, broke, running down my legs, freezing. And I think I cursed at everyone I knew in this world, "What the heck am I doing in Maine? I belong in the South Bronx." But again, it was absolutely gorgeous. And when I left there, I crossed a bridge that separated New Hampshire and Maine, and I said, "I will never go back this way again."

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Frank Hernandez:

And I haven't, but my wife and I are making a trip up there, because I want her to experience what I went through and the beauty. As a 19-year-old, you couldn't appreciate how beautiful it was. Now I can appreciate it.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah, that's nice.

Frank Hernandez:

Yeah, it is. The military, at least the Air Force does, I'm not sure about the other branches, they have a program called Swap. If you find someone that is the same career that you are, and has the same skill level that you have, you can just do a trade, like a sports trade. The only thing is that they don't fund it for you. You have to pay for everything. I had some clothes and a TV, threw it in the trunk of the car and I was able to swap... I found a guy in Washington, DC that was from New Hampshire, wanted to be closer to home, and he felt the reverse of My Cousin Vinny, he felt out of place in Washington, DC like I felt out of place in Maine.

Frank Hernandez:

So we swapped. I went to Washington. The day that I arrived in Washington, President Reagan was shot. So that was my introduction to Washington. And Washington, DC, amazing city. Absolutely beautiful. So much culture, so much to do there. And I hate to say it, it was what I knew. It was riddle with crime. It was riddle with drugs. It was almost like coming home to a certain degree.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

And I felt comfortable with that. You would go up to the top of the hill and it's where Saint Elizabeths was at, where John Hinckley ultimately was placed, in this hospital called Saint Elizabeths Hospital. And I used to go up there, and this was in the middle of the ghetto, didn't phase me because it was like being back in the Bronx.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

So I stayed there for another 13 months. I was working my way... which was amazing. You leave New York City, join the military, and whenever you get vacation time, you don't take it to travel the world, you go back home to New York City.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

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Frank Hernandez:

Go figure. I was trying to work my way closer to New York City. So from Washington, DC, I swapped again. So in my first two, two and a half years, I had swapped twice. I had found somebody that was in Delaware that wanted to go to Washington. And while I liked Washington, Delaware put me an hour closer to New York. So I swapped, went to Delaware, and my son was conceived in Delaware. As soon as left there... again, God does things in a funny way sometimes.

Frank Hernandez:

After being in Delaware, and I stayed there... my first two assignments were 13 months, 13 months, I stayed in Delaware for seven years.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow, long time, yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

Absolutely. No, forgive me, forgive me. I stayed in Delaware three and a half years. My next assignment was seven years.

Greg Lindberg:

I see.

Frank Hernandez:

After three and a half years, one day they called me up and they said, "Hey, Frank, some paperwork came in for you, and you're being relocated." I said, "Where am I going?" Going right back to Washington, DC. So I went back to Washington, DC. This time with an organization called Headquarters Air Force Office of Special Investigations. And it is, if you will, the Air Force's version of the FBI.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Frank Hernandez:

So I stayed there for seven and a half years. Amazing time. Great for my career. Really beneficial. It looked really good for my career to have been because it was a headquarters level, and that looks good. So, while I was there, towards the end of it, I was sent to the Middle East for a six-month tour to go in support of Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield. And again, just God moving me around with a purpose, it was a classified location. I couldn't tell my family where I was.

Frank Hernandez:

We lived, slept, and ate in somewhat underground. We were hiding the fact that we were even there. The only way I could try to give my wife an example, couldn't talk about the timezone, couldn't talk about the weather, the terrain, because the enemy was listening. And if you said enough they would figure out where you were at.

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Greg Lindberg:

Right. That must have been a tough position to be in.

Frank Hernandez:

Very much so, and very stressful. But here is the amazing thing that the average American doesn't realize: as we sit here speaking right now, you'll have military members that are scattered all over the world protecting our freedoms. As we sleep, as we eat, these men and women are out there defending our nation, defending our freedom. And the sacrifices that they make, I have missed, as have many other veterans, birth of family members, the death of family members, Christmas, New Year's, Thanksgiving, birthdays, anniversaries. You do what you have to do for the greater good, and you understand that.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

It's so powerful the relationships that you develop while you're on a deployment, the brotherhood and the sisterhood that it just happens. And I think that has something to do with being in a position of life and death. I think that the bond is, it's an unbreakable thing. It's something... and I will tell you, as I speak to military members now, especially the combat veterans, when they come back from these deployments, in the combat zone, wherever that is, they have such a hard time acclimating to being back here.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

They feel, especially if they separate after that, they feel isolated, a sense of loss of identity. Their relationships suffer. Those that suffer from PTSD, TBIs, traumatic brain injuries. Sadly, TBIs, because of IEDs has become... IEDs have become the weapon of choice in the Middle East right now, so you have so many of our brave men and women that are coming back and having so many difficulties dealing with the transition. I told you that when I first joined the military, they do such an amazing job, and I'm not disparaging in any way, shape, or form, this is just as I talk to combat veterans, this is what I'm hearing, and my own experience as well. The military does an absolutely amazing job indoctrinating you, bringing you in, breaking you down the basic training just to bring you back up the military way.

Frank Hernandez:

It is absolutely amazing. They do a great job, however, when you're going out the door, you'll get a five to 10 day class called Transition Assistance Program, and those five to 10 days are supposed to prepare you to go out. They just don't. I guess I understand it, you're not going to be one of their resources. The level of care, the level of concern for you at that point, it's just not there the same way because you're leaving them.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

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Frank Hernandez:

But it's not fair because the sad part is, after 9/11, in the last 18, 19 years that we have had a presence in the Middle East, approximately 2,400 young men and women have passed away over there. We have an epidemic in our country of veteran suicides. At the rate of 22 a day, that totals... and again, I'm going to repeat this a couple of times, 8,030 veterans a year. To put that in perspective, and to make sure that it's clearly understood, you have approximately 2,400 in an 18, 19-year timeframe serving in a combat zone, being shot at, mortars flying overhead, IEDs, approximately 2,400 have passed away, but returning veterans, 22 a day, 8,030 a year. So, yes, they came home from the war, did the war come back with them?

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

Which is sad. Again, I'm not trying to disparage the military because it's the best thing I ever did, but the reality is... and there has to be training conducted on this with the leadership of the military, the reality is that it's viewed as the stigma that's associated with asking for help. Military trains you to do many things. The one thing they don't train you to do is to ask for help. You come back from combat and you're a big, bad tough man or tough woman, it's looked at as a weakness to say, "Hey, I need help. Something isn't right with me."

Frank Hernandez:

And they're afraid that the leadership may lose faith in their ability to work well, to conduct a mission. So, a lot of people, sadly, don't ask for the help they need.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

And it breaks my heart. It breaks my heart. We're losing way too many people, and you have politicians, you have the Department of Defense, you have the Department of Veterans Affairs, everybody's saying all these things we're going to do. To a certain degree, I almost feel like we can't count on anybody else to take care of us, we need to take care of our own.

Greg Lindberg:

No doubt, yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

And research has shown that peer-to-peer counseling, when these combat veterans are there talking to someone about their issues, if that person hasn't gone through what they're going through, they feel that they can't connect, they can't appreciate their experiences. As I speak to these combat veterans, I'm hearing more and more of them saying, "When I came back, I just didn't feel like I belonged. I had a hard time with relationships." And I would ask, "Okay, did you have a hard time in relationships with everyone?" "No. Just the people that hadn't served."

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Frank Hernandez:

So I said, "Okay, so you felt good talking to other veterans?" "Yes." Yes, they did. But they feel as if they're just an outcast and people don't understand them. And sometimes veterans have the hardship of being misunderstood. Most civilians feel that anybody's that's been to a combat zone suffers from PTSD. Some do, absolutely. And if you suffer from PTSD and it's not treated, you're four times more likely to commit suicide. So, again, I'm not trying to say anything bad about any organization, I'm just saying we need to take better care of those that have served for our nation.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. Those numbers really speak for themselves. It's such a sad thing. Such a huge epidemic, and I feel like it's getting worse, or it's increasing as time goes on.

Frank Hernandez:

Exactly, exactly. And literally I have cried because as I speak to our veterans... I have had veterans that some guys, 25, 27, 28 years old, and in talking to them, I ask them, "How many combat buddies have you lost?" Two weeks ago a veteran told me that in the last year he has lost eight to suicide. That's just powerful. Like I said, they left the war, but to a certain degree, the war has followed them home mentally.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

It's as if a part of them remained over there, they didn't come back whole.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

And we need to do something about that.

Greg Lindberg:

No doubt. I am curious about your experience while in the military and then coming out. Did you experience any challenges yourself?

Frank Hernandez:

It's funny you ask that because I'm an old man now, I freely accept that. When I was younger, I thought I was tougher. Again, the New York mentality, can't help it. I am doing some research, and as I'm talking to these soldiers, things that I had put aside that I didn't want to face are slapping me in the face as I'm watching it and I'm hearing their stories, in them, I have the same exact problems.

Greg Lindberg:

Really.

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Frank Hernandez:

Just didn't want to deal with them.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

Angry, irritable, trying my best to smile, be happy with everything, but relationships suffered. I went through a divorce, as many veterans that return back do. And yes, I did have the hardships, but I didn't want to admit it, but I can't hide from it anymore. They're right there. They're slapping me in the face, and I need to do something about it.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. I appreciate your honesty.

Frank Hernandez:

I appreciate you asking these questions, and I appreciate the opportunity to be here to tell this story.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. Yeah. Just to kind of wrap up, as far as your Air Force career, is there anything that really has stuck with you from a positive standpoint that really made an impression on you, any experiences?

Frank Hernandez:

Everyone that I came across in my Air Force career has made a positive impression on me, because these are the bravest, most courageous people that you will ever meet. You're talking about kids at 17, and yes, they're kids at 17, but they're going to a combat zone. Wow, you have 17-year-olds back here in the United States playing video games. You have 17, 18-year-olds being shot at.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

So everyone I've ever encountered, honestly has been positive. The military gives you some amazing opportunities. They're willing to pay for your education. They'll pay \$250 a credit hour for you to go to college. The Post-9/11 GI Bill... just a short story about that. When I was in, there was a program called VEAP, Veterans' Educational Assistance Program. It wasn't one of the better programs they had, so you contributed money, and they would match it and give you, I believe, it was two-to-one, for whatever you contributed.

Frank Hernandez:

I contributed for a short time, and then everybody... As I spoke to people in education, they said that the program might go away, so I stopped contributing. So when I got out, there was no opportunity for me to go back to school. And again, by the grace of God, and it's a terrible thing that it happened, but after the 9/11 attacks, they came out with a program called the Post-9/11 GI Bill. And if you served for at least

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three years after 9/11, the VA would pay for 100% of your education, tuition, books, and you'll receive a stipend to go to school. They were paying me \$1600 and change to go to school, to be a student.

Frank Hernandez:

So for anybody that's thinking about going into the military, you get an opportunity to travel, they pay your education, oh, and with that Post-9/11 GI Bill, now they've added a clause to it that if you complete your education while you're in, when you get out, you can transfer that Post-9/11 Bill to your wife, husband, or children. They can go to college.

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Frank Hernandez:

Right. So again, I'm not trying to make it seem like it's a negative experience. It was the best experience I ever had. And the amazing thing is that while I tell you these stories of these combat veterans, and I will tell you my own story, that yeah, it was a difficult transition. A part of me isn't the same. You're not the same person you were when you left than when you come home. However, the most amazing thing about it is that as I'm speaking to these combat veterans, and in my own life, at the end I will ask them, "If you had to do it all over again, would you?" Every single one has said, "Yes."

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Frank Hernandez:

So, was it difficult? Absolutely. Have we lost numerous brothers and sisters? Absolutely. But when I went into basic training, like I said, I didn't have the exact understanding of what I was getting into. 26 years later, to be able to give back to your country who has given so much to me and my family, to have had the opportunities that I've had, because of my time in the military, I was able to finish my undergraduate degree, my master's degree, and now I am three months from finishing my doctoral degree. That is because of the decision that my mother made for me 40 years ago.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

So it wasn't all negative. Like anything else in life, there's good and there's bad.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely, yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

But to have had the opportunity to serve our country, no matter what we've all gone through, everybody says the same answer, "I would absolutely do it again. It's a calling." And many people don't know this, but it is between half a percent and three-quarters of a percent of the American population

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that services in the military at any given time. Less than 1% of the American population serves. So that's a very special group of people right there.

Greg Lindberg:

No question. Yeah, very well said.

Frank Hernandez:

Thank you.

Greg Lindberg:

So, let's transition to getting into education and teaching. I know you've been at Saint Leo, I believe, for about five years.

Frank Hernandez:

Exactly. Five, six years I've been here.

Greg Lindberg:

Yup. Talk to me about how you came to Saint Leo, what inspired you to take on a teaching role here, and then your experience here.

Frank Hernandez:

Again, another funny story because God has a sense of humor. I came here for all the wrong reasons. I'm not going to lie. When that Post-9/11 GI Bill came about, I said, "Okay, you're going to pay me to go to school? I'd be a fool not to take advantage of this opportunity." I looked at the rate that they would pay for Orlando, because I actually lived closer to Orlando, and I looked at the rate they would pay for Tampa, because Saint Leo was on the Tampa side.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

And the Tampa side was actually \$300 more a month, so that was my incentive to come to Saint Leo. I hate to admit it, but that's the honest-to-God's truth.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah, yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

But I will tell you this: the very first time that I turned onto this campus, I turned to my wife, and the very first thing you see when you turn on the campus is the tower with the clock and the cross. I am a minister in the Catholic church, and I turned to my wife and I said, "I can't tell you why, but I just feel Saint Leo University is going to play a big role in our lives." Subsequent to that, I have become an adjunct professor here. My wife is an adjunct professor. My daughter is an adjunct professor. And my son, the

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Orange County sheriff was a doctoral student here, studying for his criminal justice degree. So all of us, and I'm recruiting my grandchildren now to come here.

Greg Lindberg:

Nice, yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

But the funny part of all of this, when I was a student, because I got my master's degree here, and I had a professor of a strategic management course, it was the capstone course, and his name was Dr. Nastanski. We were doing a presentation on a company that was doing well, and then not so much, so we were doing it on Nintendo. I asked the group, "Hey, how would you guys like to get dressed up like Mario and Luigi? And the princess." And they looked at me, and kind of your reaction, they were kind of like, "No." They thought I was a fool. And maybe I was, but I said, "Do you mind if I do?" They said, "No."

Frank Hernandez:

I went and bought a Mario costume at Party City, and I did my presentation. I came in, everybody laughed at me of course, and I said, "Hello, my name's Mario." And I went into the whole spiel, and I did the presentation like that. After that, Dr. Nastanski, who was the dean of the college of business asked me, "What are you going to do now?" I said, "I'm not sure. I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do when I grow up." And he said, "Why don't you come by the office on Monday?" And I was like, "Sure." In the back of my mind, I was like, "You think he's going to ask you to maybe teach?" But in the front of my mind, I was like, "No." You're that kid from the South Bronx. This was never on your radar. You've already overachieved.

Frank Hernandez:

And when I went to his office, we sat there for 30 minutes, which I was impressed with the fact he was willing to give me 30 minutes of his time, because he was a very busy man. And at the end, because he was a strategic management guy, at the end he said, "Frank, have you considered teaching?" And I'm not going to lie, I tried to play it cool, the New Yorker in me, I've got to keep going back to New York because that's what I know. The New Yorker in me was acting real cool, but on the inside I was doing a serious happy dance. I was so excited.

Frank Hernandez:

He told me, "You did something that is critical. You were entertaining. You had my attention, and that's what's the critical part. You have to get the attention of the students and hold that attention. You did that throughout your whole presentation, but yet you got all the points across." And I walked out, I said, "Yeah, absolutely. I will consider that." I walked out, called me wife, told her, and the next day I got a phone call from Dr. Lauder, set me up with an interview, and they said, "All you got to do is get certified to teach now," and that was five, six years ago. And I still, being the fool that I am, on Halloween, I tell the class, "If you come in with a costume, the person that has the best costume, I'll invite somebody else in here to judge, you get a homework pass."

Frank Hernandez:

And I have come in as the Stay-Puft Marshmallow guy from Ghostbusters, whatever he was with a white costume with an inflatable... with the little motor going inside. And I have taught like that. On a day that I was being evaluated, it was Halloween, and I was wearing my Stay-Puft guy, and I told the evaluator,

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"Listen, I'm sorry, but this was scheduled before you were scheduled." And she said, "Please do it." But I'm all about making a connection with my students.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

And to give you an idea of the level of connection, I have officiated two of my students' weddings, in October, October 20, 2020, I'm doing another one of their weddings. And a student of mine, I tell them, "We're family. Saint Leo was a family. So in the future, if you have children, if you get married, if you graduate from another school, you invite me and I'm there."

Greg Lindberg:

Wow.

Frank Hernandez:

And I had a student invite me to go down to Houston, Texas for his graduation from law school. He reached back to me and he said, "You said that, and I just wanted to see if you would have any interest." That night, my wife and I rented a car, drove out to Houston, all night Thursday night. Friday we were at his graduation, stayed in Texas Saturday. Sunday morning drove back. If you think enough of me to invite me to something that important in your life, I'd be a fool not to be there.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

So, Saint Leo University has given me such a tremendous opportunity. I served as the interim director of military affairs, this time last year, the spring semester of '19, and again, I'm full of funny stories, or at least I think they're funny. Maybe they're not. Last April, the student government nominated my wife and I for the award of Professor of the Year. So my wife was my competitor. And here's the reality of it: the students, I see them as my customers. I'm here to give them a good experience to teach them, teach them how to make connections, to teach them what I'm supposed to teach them, but this award came from the students. I ended up winning the award.

Frank Hernandez:

And it was kind of funny, because just the other day, we were in one of our cars, and my wife said, "You still have the invitation to the Professor of the Year Award. Why don't you have mine up in a plaque? I put it in a frame up in my office." I looked at her, without thinking, I said, "I don't put the invitation in, because I won the plaque." I laugh now, but she didn't think it was that funny.

Frank Hernandez:

I say this because I tell you, this is what Saint Leo has given to me. This is what the military has given to me. I would not have the education that I have... like I said, I'm three months from completing a doctoral degree. If it wasn't for the military, I wouldn't have that. The VA and the military, and Saint Leo University, best things that ever happened to me in my life. When I got out of the military... when I got

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to basic training, while I went in immature, you come out with a sense of purpose. You have meaning in your life. When I left the military, and a lot of veterans experience this, you lose that sense of purpose and your identity. Saint Leo gave me that sense of purpose and my identity back again. And for that, I'll forever be grateful.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah. That's very well said, very well put. I definitely have to say, you mentioned using the costumes and dressing up. I mean, your energy is infectious, and I can only imagine how the students react to that or respond, and how much of a positive impact that has on them.

Frank Hernandez:

You have no idea. You have no idea how much that means to me. Now, I will tell you, I have had other people on the campus... This last Halloween, I was a dinosaur. And in the middle of a lesson, the batteries died.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, geez.

Frank Hernandez:

So the costume just flopped over. Thank God I had extra batteries, but I've seen other people on campus look at me like, "What the heck is wrong with that guy?" And the thing is, I'm okay with that.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah.

Frank Hernandez:

Because I'm here for the students.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Frank Hernandez:

And that will never be lost on me. I appreciate... If it's not for them, there's no reason for me to even be here. And people like yourself, and Nate, we are a family here at Saint Leo, and I'm honored to even be a part of this family. It's a blessing from God.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. I can second that for sure. All right, well, Frank, I really appreciate your time, and you gave some tremendous insight on your military experience, and obviously your teaching career here. Can't thank you enough for joining us here on the Saint Leo 360 podcast.

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Frank Hernandez:

Thank you. I appreciate it. And just so you know, I see you on campus, I'm not going to call you Greg. Because of that smoothness of your voice, you are Rico Suave. Thanks again, Nate. Thanks again, Rico. I appreciate you guys, and God bless.

Greg Lindberg:

Thank you, Frank.

Speaker 1:

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