Karen Velazco

Service, Honor, and Scars

It couldn’t have been a more cruel welcome for Reginald Gay as he walked into the airport with his camouflage uniform and a mind full of irreversible images. “I almost killed a man within 48 hours of returning to the United States,” he said, “I was heading to the lounge in the airport; this guy ran up to me, spit on me, and called me a ‘baby killer’. I lost it.”

Gay was drafted into the war during his sophomore year in college, but immediately decided to join the military, so that he can choose what he wants to do in the military rather than just be put somewhere. Most days Gay is his normal jolly 6’ 5” self, but on occasion he has flash backs to undesirable memories that stir up anger. He sees the dirt road and the car. He sees a dime size item flying through the air and landing next to the car. Within seconds he sees the car explode. “I came back sick,” Gay said, “I saw my best friend die and I had these demons inside me that I couldn’t shake off.” After returning from Vietnam, he was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and had to see a psychiatrist three times a week and have group therapy once a week in order to heal mentally. “I would snap at people often, I began drinking and smoking a lot. I was in a bad place,” he said, “Everyone thought we were bad guys, no one approved of the war; they thought we were just destroying families.” The soldiers of Vietnam weren’t welcomed back with open arms, but when the soldiers retuned from the Gulf War, it was a different story. “Everyone was cheering and waving flags for them. We didn’t get any of that. I sat and just cried to myself.” Gay said.

After recovering from the experiences of the Vietnam War, Gay went to the Los Angeles Police Academy and became part of the Los Angeles Police Department, which is where he met his wife, Danielle Banks. “I was an office clerk in the Newton Division of LAPD, when I met Reggie,” Banks said, “He encouraged me to become an officer and now I’m a detective.” Together they had a daughter, Raven Gay, who is now 19 years old. “I use to worry a lot about my dad when I was little and he had to go was work, I was afraid he was going to get hurt. Now I know he’s trained and he’s been doing this for years, so I know he’ll be okay.” She said.

Reginald Gay became interested in law enforcement at 15 years old. His father was a sheriff, but never pressured him or his two brothers to pursue a career in law enforcement. “My dad always told me, ‘It’s a good profession, you’re not going to get rich doing it, but you’ll meet a lot of different people,’ and he couldn’t have been more right.” Gay said. Gay has been with LAPD for 30 years and for 10 of those 30, he has had undercover assignments.

The first time Gay made an undercover arrest was when he was working the Special Problems Unit in Downtown Los Angeles in an area known as “The Alley.” Thieves would be looking out for people shopping who returned to their car to drop off items purchased and then left to shop some more. Gay and his partner were roaming the streets of “The Alley” in their baggy distressed jeans, bandanas, and wife beaters when they noticed two young men attempting to break into the truck of an old white Toyota. A foot chase quickly began to catch the two guys. Gay caught one of the guys by a hamburger stand and had him at gunpoint when he heard, “Stop! Put down the gun!” “The next thing I knew I had guns aimed at me by LAPD officers,” he said, “The people from the hamburger stand thought I was the bad guy and called the police on me.” Gay followed instructions and slowly put down the gun while his partner frantically attempted to let the officers know they were both cops. Gay cautiously turned around and quickly the officers realized it was Gay. “I still get laughed at about that day,” he said, “It was my first assignment and I almost got shot because I fit in so perfectly that they couldn’t even recognize me.”

After 30 years of being with LAPD and 17 years in the military, Reginald Gay will be retiring at the age of 67 with complete satisfaction of his career. It was a rough start for Gay. He went through a dark time at a young age, but with treatment he was able to lead a normal life and became an award-winning LAPD officer. As Gay reclines on his couch with a smile on his face he describes his career as dangerous, but fulfilling. “Being in law enforcement gives you a chance to think and to help people; a chance to teach, as well as have people teach you.” He said.