Sergeant Ozzy Ramos Comes Home

Ozzy Ramos grew up on Brooklyn's tough streets and in the even tougher Marine Corps—but neither prepared him for losing his wife, daughter and stepson to AIDS. Now the retired officer has a new mission: finding HIV-affected families a home in which to heal.

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Two years ago, retired United States Marine staff sergeant Ozzy Ramos was browsing through a furniture store in Fredericksburg, Virginia, when he came across a painting that would change his life. It showed an orange door, surrounded by clouds, open halfway as if to say, "Come in," Ramos recalls. It wasn't exactly a masterpiece, but he was spellbound and couldn't figure out why. On impulse, he picked it up, plunked down $230 and hauled it to his office, where he works in security clearance for the government. Ramos hung the picture, called "Opportunity Knocks," above his desk, sure that a higher force had moved him to buy it.

"I would glance at the picture and keep on working, just waiting for something to happen," says Ramos, now 42, in an easygoing tone one might not expect from a veteran military officer. "This painting was telling me to do something."

But what? Ramos knew this much: He was no stranger to doors. AIDS had slammed so many in his face. The disease had claimed his wife, his daughter and his stepson. Though Ramos himself is HIV negative, the virus had followed him and his positive wife through his military career. They faced the particularly severe AIDS stigma of the 1980s, when he tried to educate his fellow servicemen and superiors.

In 2006, having buried his family and lost any sense of home to AIDS, Ramos was trying to move on with his life when the painting's message suddenly became clear—and its door swung wide open. He realized that the only way he could heal was to create a home for others living with the disease. And so this break-dancer-turned-chief warrant officer, the son of a stay-at-home mom and a Puerto Rican cobbler, created an AIDS service organization called the Home of Miracles and Embraces (H.O.M.E.).

With funding from Doris Buffett, sister of the financier Warren Buffett and president of the Sunshine Lady Foundation, H.O.M.E. hopes to open an all-expenses-paid community in rural Virginia where children living with HIV and their families can come together, connect and forge a sense of belonging in a stigma-free environment.

“Our goal is to create something magical,” says Ramos. “H.O.M.E. is where the heart is, where families can get together and discuss their issues. Where they can find free support and form networking groups.” Though he’s still scouting different locations, Ramos adds, he hopes to take H.O.M.E. national and, in time, global: “Wherever there’s a high concentration of need, that’s where we’d like to take H.O.M.E.” Ozzy Ramos’s extraordinary journey toward redefining “community” for himself and others has taken him from one tough locale to another: from his childhood in the Knickerbocker and Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhoods of Brooklyn; to the sometimes excruciating discipline of the Camp Lejeune Marine base, in North Carolina; to New York ACT UP rallies; to the hospital rooms where his loved ones died of AIDS.

The story begins in the 1970s, amid Knickerbocker’s gang culture—which, Ramos acknowledges, he found hard to avoid, along with its drugs and alcohol. “If you weren’t a part of what was going on you were considered the chump of the bunch,” Ramos recalls. “It was just so difficult not experimenting or not being a part of it.” Worried, his parents enrolled him in an alternative school in Bedford-Stuyvesant. He traded in his jeans for slacks and, as per the school’s dress code, wore a tie each Friday—which, he says, created a distance between him and his old friends.

“You would seldom see a Puerto Rican in my neighborhood wear a tie,” he says. “A lot of the guys really took offense to that, thinking that I was trying to be better than them. They cursed me out, and they alienated me.”

But Ramos got by. He became a prominent athlete, excelling in softball under the wing of teacher and coach John Davis, who notes that although he and Ozzy have become close over the years, their first meeting was far from friendly.

“My first impression was that he was a difficult youngster,” Davis says. They first met, Davis says, when he saw Ramos arguing with a school security guard and, sensing a physical confrontation, he intervened. As he got to know Ramos, he noticed a change not only in him, but in how the other students reacted to him. “He had a leadership quality,” Davis says. “The other kids seemed to look up to him right away.”

After graduating in 1985, Ramos enrolled at Long Island University. There he met Maritza, a lab partner, who would soon become his wife. The two had sons from previous relationships: She had a boy named Wilfredo, and Ramos was caring for his 5-year-old son, Tony, of whom he had just gained custody. Ozzy and Maritza looked forward to expanding the family with kids of their own.

However, Ramos’s mother, Carmen, soon became ill with pancreatic cancer, and she passed away six months after her diagnosis. Ramos was devastated. He dropped out of school and quit his job, reverting to his life on the streets. “I was going to become a statistic,” he says. “I knew I was heading down that wrong road.” In search of salvation, he dropped by a Marine Corps recruiting station. “I said to myself, ‘This is the only thing that’s going to save me right now.’”

Ozzy, Maritza, Wilfredo and Tony packed their bags for Camp Lejeune, in North Carolina, the following Monday. Maritza was now pregnant, and Ozzy hoped that the impending birth and

change of scenery would offer a new beginning. He named his newborn girl Carmen Venus to honor his mother and began boot camp immediately. However, in 1986, at the age of 8 months, Venus began having trouble breathing. Ozzy and Maritza took her to the Camp Lejeune hospital, where doctors were baffled when test after test failed to diagnose her respiratory complications. Ozzy and Maritza finally brought Venus to Duke University Medical Center, where doctors diagnosed her with HIV. The rest of the family was also tested. While Ozzy and Tony were negative, Maritza and Wilfredo were positive. Maritza had been infected by Wilfredo's father.

"There we were, a heterosexual monogamous couple, and AIDS had affected us," says Ramos. "We always thought—especially me—that this was a gay disease. And there we were with it. We don't know anything about it, don't know what to do, and we get hit with this big blow."

Venus died within two months, and Ramos blamed himself. "I named her after my mother to try to keep part of my mother in my life," he says. "Then Venus wound up getting sick and I lost her, too, and I started worrying that I cursed her."

In the mid-'80s an AIDS diagnosis was typically a death sentence. Reported cases of heterosexual infection were rare, and children infected through mother-to-child transmission even more so. After Maritza and the children were diagnosed, she told Ozzy that if he wanted to leave them, she would understand. Ozzy acknowledges that his decision to stay wasn't easy: "She was my best friend. I came back to her and I said, 'I thought about it, I don't know what's in store for us. I don't know if we're all going to die. But I'm not leaving my family.'"

Ramos says that initially, the Marine Corps was less understanding. He says that when he told his commanding officer at Camp Lejeune about his wife's diagnosis, the first thing he did was bar Maritza from coming on base. "That was one of the things that was very detrimental to her," Ramos says, "because it made her feel contaminated." He adds that while he continued to serve at Camp Lejeune, he never again felt welcome there. He says superiors stigmatized him by, for example, putting him on weekend duties and even offering him a discharge.

He was transferred to an inspector instructor unit in Raleigh, North Carolina—staffed by just over a dozen Marines—late in 1986. His superior, Major Charles Valrie, called Ozzy and Maritza into his office as soon as they arrived. Expecting the worst, they stood at attention in front of Major Valrie's desk. Valrie never said "At ease." Instead, he walked around his desk, right over to Maritza, and threw his arms around her. She broke down and cried.

"He was like an angel sent to me," says Ramos. "Prior to us getting there, he took it upon himself to get educated about HIV/AIDS, and he actually educated his entire staff."

After Valrie heard of the hardships Ramos had faced at Camp Lejeune, he wanted to ensure that Ramos felt at home while on base. "Nobody treated him like an outcast [there]," says Valrie, who remembers Ramos as a hard worker. "We made everybody aware of what the circumstances were and there was no ostracizing like what was going on in the general population at that time."

Says Ramos: “That’s the Marine Corps I like to remember. If you have somebody who’s educated and will look at things in a positive light, then everybody else that falls below is going to see things that way too. Leadership by example.”

Settled in among friends, an invigorated Maritza became heavily involved in AIDS activism, connecting with a newly formed North Carolina chapter of activist group ACT UP. Ramos’s high school teacher John Davis (who was later diagnosed with AIDS in 1993) had been heavily involved with the group since 1987. After hearing of Maritza’s condition, he invited her and Ozzy to a late-1980s New York City ACT UP demonstration, where Ozzy stood beside Maritza in his dress-blue uniform, in front of 700 AIDS activists.

“The crowd went wild,” says Davis, now a H.O.M.E. director. “He told them why he was there, they applauded and they got him the most information they could get him at that point.”

He would rely on that information in 1991, when Maritza’s health began to falter. A caregiver certified by the American Red Cross, he cared for her full-time on top of his Marine Corps duties. One afternoon, Maritza lay down for a nap and slipped into a coma. Ramos authorized a slow transition from lifesaving medication to pain relievers.

Maritza died on June 1, 1992.

Soon afterward, Ramos’s relationship with his stepson, Wilfredo, became strained. Wilfredo moved in with his grandparents in New York, leaving Ramos to raise Tony and his nephew, Luis—who was staying with him at the time. Ramos also struggled in his career, battling with superior officers who frowned upon his single-father status. As his personal life crumbled, Ramos stayed focused on the Marines, dedicating himself to becoming its first-ever AIDS educator. Previously, AIDS education classes were taught by medical officials and Naval officers. But, Ramos says, “the Marines and the Navy are like oil and water.”

Ramos was later assigned to Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia, where he counseled Marines newly diagnosed with HIV. He noticed a significant number of Marines testing positive from all ranks and backgrounds, and the Corps was having a hard time catching up. “The Marine Corps didn’t know what to do with these people,” Ramos says. “They got better in dealing with them over time, and they carried on what we always emphasize: taking care of our own. But it wasn’t always that way.”

When AIDS became widespread in the 1980s, Ramos says that the Marines’ initial response was to discharge personnel following a positive diagnosis. However, by the time Ramos became an AIDS educator and information about HIV transmission became more widespread, the Marines shifted policies. Those that tested positive would be allowed to continue to serve as long as they did not progress to AIDS, and the Corps dealt with positive Marines on a case-by-case basis.

Meanwhile, his stepson was losing his own battle against the virus. Against Ramos’s urging, Wilfredo had stopped taking his HIV medications. He died in 1999 at the age of 20.

Despite losing yet another family member, Ramos pushed forward. He was selected as a warrant officer in 1998, and in 2001 he joined the Presidential Support Marine Barracks in Washington, DC, where he served until his February 2006 retirement, after which he landed his current job. He has remarried but says he doesn't plan to start a new family.

As for his late family, he says he knows that Maritza, Wilfredo and Venus would be proud of his plans for H.O.M.E. "I think that they would be happy that I'm keeping them alive in a sense," he adds. "Also, I'm kind of paying it forward and helping others that are in the same struggle as we were many years ago."

H.O.M.E. recently reached out to AIDS-ravaged Vietnam, where it sponsors 20 HIV-positive children through the Five Loaves Two Fishes Foundation. "We've got 20 kids that we're happy to save," Ramos says. "And one of our dollars is a lot of theirs, so it's easy to support them."

Still, the organization needs a financial foundation. Ramos pursued Doris Buffett and her foundation at one of her speaking engagements in April 2007. He typed up his experiences with AIDS and his plans for H.O.M.E., knowing that he'd have only a few minutes with her. Introducing himself and his organization, he handed her a folder and hoped for the best. Buffett soon agreed to match the $11,575 H.O.M.E. raised to give Christmas presents to 28 HIV-positive children served by the Georgetown University Medical Center, as well as the kids' siblings. "I was struck by the fact that he truly was sincere," says Buffett. "A little boost at the beginning will carry them a long way."

While H.O.M.E. tirelessly raises money to build actual homes with wide-open doors, its staff works for free and is happy to do so. "When we were in the Marine Corps we didn't do it for the big bucks. We did it because we were making a difference and it was something special," says former Marine and H.O.M.E. program director Lonnie Martin. "Once a marine, always a marine. We're used to, say, helping the president reinforce his foreign policy. Right now, we've got to build this organization to essentially attack something else: We're attacking HIV. That's what the mission is going to be."

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