

# Sam Bonilla is Touring the World

## Marine, police officer and lawyer

**B**orn in Brooklyn, New York, Samuel Bonilla went to high school in Long Island where his family moved as he got older. Most of the people in their sub-division were transplants from one of the five boroughs of New York, from many different backgrounds. Their friends and neighbors were Puerto Rican, Italian, Irish, Jewish, German, Greek, Portuguese, and African American, so Bonilla had a very good multi-cultural upbringing. He was always interested in music growing up, and planned on

military were watching M\*A\*S\*H with my mom growing up. Bonilla watched every military movie he could; and felt drawn to that... like some type of calling. When it came time to choose which branch of service, it was an easy choice... the Marines had a reputation for being the toughest branch and they had the best looking uniforms. Pretty standard draw for most Marines

There were a lot of memories that have stayed with Bonilla during his time in the Marine Corps. For example, he'll never forget the time

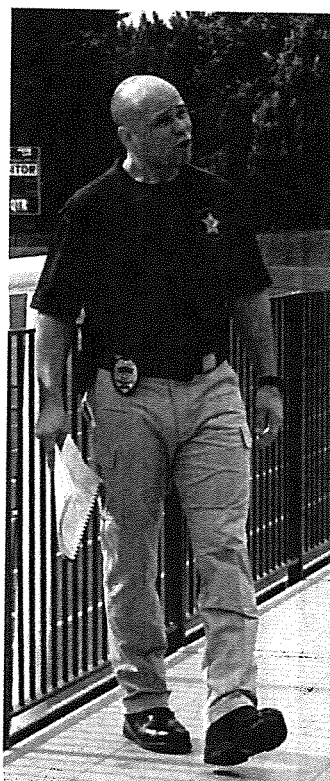


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Samuel Bonilla

**“Not everything in life works out. Sometimes you have to roll with it and make the best of the situation.”**

—Sam Bonilla

being in a metal band and touring the world ... well, he did get to see the world, but it wasn't in a metal band.

Sam Bonilla joined the Marines his senior year of high school in 1988. He recalls he wasn't a very good student, nor was he a very good guitar player (despite his metal band dreams). As far as he can remember he had always been interested in the military life. His earliest memories of the

they were forced to drink two full canteens of water right after eating chow. It was summer time while he was at Parris Island and they had to make sure they were hydrated. Well... after consuming one canteen they had to hold it upside down over their heads on a line facing each other. While attempting to consume the second canteen, the guy in front of Bonilla puked a puddle of water and chow. Upon seeing this, Bonilla puked a puddle of water and chow. Next thing you knew everyone is puking. Bonilla never laughed so hard in between puking in his life: laugh... puke... laugh... puke! Then on a more serious note there are the serious memories that stick with you...

“Never forgotten all of the leadership lessons I learned,” says Bonilla. Most importantly, I discovered in myself the ability to put my mind to something and accomplish it successfully. I was a United States Marine! I was a part

of something very special! This was not given to me! I earned it! This was the first time in my life that I felt a sense of accomplishment... a sense of pride... a sense of confidence! That has stayed with me through finishing my college degree after the military, through the police academy, and through law school.”

*How does a hard core Marine transition to civilian life and chose the life of a LOE? Law Enforcement Officer? COP?*

Bonilla “My original plan was to re-enlist in the Marines. However, I wanted to change my MOS (grunt) to more of a “trade” MOS to learn a skill transferable to the civilian world. However, due to the military call-up of the Gulf War, there was nothing

available. I was told to re-enlist as a “rifleman,” and when something comes available I could switch then. Well, but this time I was married and had a daughter, and I did not want to get deployed again. I opted to be discharged. I now needed a plan... badly! Our family plan was to move back to Knoxville, Tennessee, where my wife was from, and I would get a job doing something there. Law enforcement seemed to be a natural transition so I took the Knoxville Police Department test. I made it to the interview portion of the screening, but was somehow eliminated. I wasn't sure why. I needed a job fast though, so I went to the employment office. The guy at the employment office told me he appreciated my service, but had nothing for someone like me. He said I was basically unskilled (in a nice way) and advised I either go back in the military or go to school. Not everything in life works out.

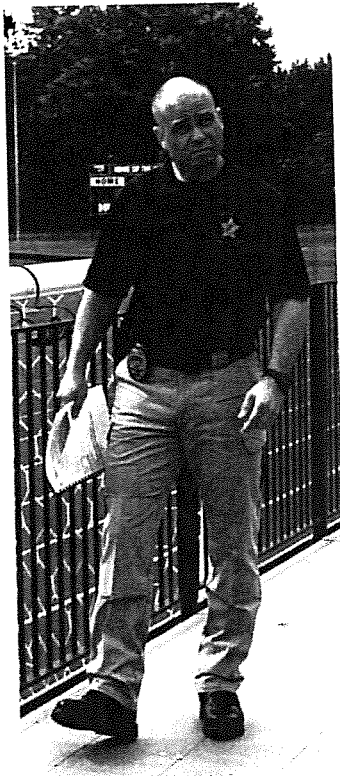
Sometimes you have to roll with it and make the best of the situation. I didn't see it then, but everything happens for a reason and things usually work out if you keep your head up and drive forward. I signed up for school as a full time accounting student and worked at a gas station in the evenings. After two years, I received my Associate Degree in Accounting and eventually moved to Illinois. My dad had just gotten transferred to Illinois from New York for work, and we thought there might be better work opportunities there. There were. I worked as an accounting clerk for a bakery supply company. I worked there for two years when I realized I was bored sitting behind a desk. I saw an ad in the paper that the Bloomingdale Police Department was testing for police officers, so I figured I'd give it another shot. I was #2 on their



eligibility list out of 320 applicants and was hired within a year. I've never loved a job as much as I do being a police officer.

Now days we see so much negative on not only Police Officers in the mainstream media but especially in the Chicago area. For Bonilla this hit home as he serves in the Chicago area so we addressed this.

*Being that you're in the Chicago area and they're so much negative press about police officers, what*



*would you like the public to know about the fine people you serve with?*

There are good and bad employees in every career in the U.S. As a police instructor at the police academy I sometimes see recruits and wonder how they got this far in the screening process. I also acknowledge that sometimes experienced officers make mistakes, and those mistakes could have tragic outcomes sometimes. This dilemma is two-fold. On one side we as a profession need to do a better job hiring and training police officers. This is a never ending process and we must appreciate that we are servants of the community. We should never forget that. Also, we as a profession should admit our shortcomings and mistakes openly. On the other side, the public should do a better job educating themselves about the police department in



their community. Get involved with local law enforcement. Learn about specific incidents your officers are dealing with in your neighborhoods. Educate yourselves about why, how and when officers use force. Also, don't always rely on the media to give you the full story. Negative news sells! Even if an officer is justified in the level of force that was used, the media will sometimes tell only half of the story. Sometimes it's because it's all they have while the department itself investigates what happened. If a member of the public took the time to get to know their officers and the command staff in charge of them, have expectations that the command staff will be forthcoming with information, educate themselves on the community and the specific incidents going on in the community; then that member of the public can trust that their officers did the right thing even if the news only gives one side of the story. This relationship is a partnership: the community and its officers. Just like any relationship it's not always going to be perfect, but we have to get involved with each other and have faith in each other.

*Is there any advice you would offer to men/women who are in transition from military life to civilian life considering the life in the LOE world?*

Being a police officer coming from the military is one of the best

decisions I ever made. If I had a chance, I would do it all over again. I am very fortunate to be in what I consider to be the best profession in the country. My mom sometimes jokes with me that I am part of the two most hated professions in the country: a lawyer and a police officer. I don't look at it that way. I have been very lucky because as a Marine, I served my country; as a police officer, I serve my community; as a lawyer, I serve police officers. This sense of service is what drew most of us to the military to begin with. Yes... I understand that many people had individual reasons for joining whatever branch they chose; but ultimately it was that sense of service that drew each of us in. Being a part of something bigger than ourselves. That's what being a police officer is like. It's the same feeling. The same camaraderie, the same satisfaction. I would recommend this job for anyone looking to continue their satisfaction in service!

If there is anything else I can say to a service member transitioning from the military into the civilian world; it's this... (1) Never forget the lessons you learned in the military. Even if your experiences weren't the best, there are still life lessons that you got out of those experiences; and all the basic knowledge that laid the foundation of your military experience transition well into the

civilian world. (2) Just because you served your country, do not expect things to be given to you (certain handouts, courtesy, respect, etc. ...). You still have to earn those things, and no one owes you anything. You served with honor and pride. Don't diminish that by making people feel sorry for you just to get a handout. No one forced you into service ... you volunteered for it. (3) When things don't go your way in life, you roll with it, adapt and make the best of your situation. If you want something in life, you have to work for it! If it's something difficult to attain, work harder! It'll be worth it and it'll mean more. Just remember how you felt when you graduated boot camp. Finally, (4) surround yourself with the people you want to be like. Ask questions, seek advice, and look for a mentor (or several mentors) in the civilian world. Seek out former military that have transitioned well and look to them for guidance. We will always look out for our brothers and sisters, and we are always willing to help each other. That bond can never be broken. Semper Fi! "

As for Annie Nelson, to all those who serve in the police departments across our nation, a heartfelt THANK YOU for your continued service!

