

# on the job with jose chavarria

Sheet metal fabricator and Marine Corps veteran

By LAURA FRENCH • Special to the Star Tribune

**W**ith unemployment rates among veterans alarmingly high, Jose Chavarria's successful transition from the military to a civilian career can provide some useful insights.

Chavarria spent 24 years in the Marine Corps before retiring on October 31, 2010. Born and raised in Houston, Texas, Chavarria says he "went in to get away from the neighborhood. The guys there weren't going anywhere. A friend said, 'Let's join the Marine Corps and see the world.'"

Chavarria was trained as a helicopter mechanic, then became an inspector and quality assurance representative. He served in Desert Storm in 1991 and did a tour in Iraq in 2004, as well as deployments to Italy, Australia and the western Pacific, rising to the rank of Gunnery Sergeant.

Life changed in 2008 when his wife, who was originally from Fridley, was diagnosed with cancer. Chavarria told his three children, "Mom's not going to let me take you anywhere else," so the family moved back to the Twin Cities. They spent the summer of 2010 getting settled in Minnesota, and she passed away in October.

By February, Chavarria says, "I was having conversations with the family cat, and I said, 'I've got to get out of here.'" He contacted the Veterans Employment Representative at one of the Minnesota Workforce Centers, where he heard about an Introduction to Sheet Metal class at a local technical college. He took the course and met with several prospective employers at his graduation ceremony. E.J. Ajax & Sons Inc. called him in for an interview and hired him in July 2011.

## What's the biggest difference between your military and civilian careers?

I don't tell anyone what to do anymore. Before, I was responsible for a couple hundred people. Now it's just me. It's pretty relaxing.

## What do you miss most about the military?

I miss the travel, being on board ship, going to other countries. A lot of my buddies miss the camaraderie, but I found that here, which I like.

## Are there similarities between your current job and your military experience?

The attitude is what I'm used to. The emphasis on safety. Do the job right the first time. If you have questions, ask. Throw some uniforms and haircuts on these guys, and they



Jose Chavarria: "For veterans, bragging about themselves is the hardest thing."

could be Marines. In January, I'll be starting my journey worker apprenticeship in sheet metal fabrication, and I'm used to training sessions. I've been to more classes in the Marine Corps than most civilians.

## What strengths do you bring to your civilian career from the military?

Punctuality. I thought my supervisor was kidding when he said, "Will you have any issues coming to work on time?" In the military, they'll write you up for being late. You also have bosses who say, "You owe me this much time." You learn not to be late. Rush jobs and changes in the schedule, working overtime and weekends — that's no problem. I did that for 24 years.

## Why do you think there's a high unemployment rate among veterans?

If I'd been on the East Coast or West Coast, I could have found a job doing what I was doing in the military, but here my only option would have been working at the airport. In my current job, I'm working with machines and working with tools, but it's not aviation. If you've been in the artillery or infantry, you're going to be stuck in a rut. So find something interesting, take a class and start advertising yourself. For veterans, bragging about themselves is the hardest thing. I could sell everyone around me but not myself. By the time I interviewed for this job, I had been through enough to be more relaxed. I'm not selling myself, I'm just telling people what I've done. □