

ONE DAY *at a* TIME

presenting a message of hope and recovery to a nation in need

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From the jungles of Vietnam to rescue at Delancey Street



The Reverend James M. Lamb, clinical supervisor over substance abuse treatment at Varner Prison in Grady, Arkansas, and at one time associated with San Francisco county jails and San Quentin state prison in California, discovered alcohol and drugs when he was 15. They took control of him for the next 29 years.

Lamb, who wrote, "The Power to Change," a book about addiction and recovery, is writing a second book, "The Revelation of Power," focusing on biblical tools for recovery along with a view on counseling theories. This is part of his story.

At 15, Lamb says, "I got hurt deeply by my first love and began to drink and party and skip school. Eventually, I quit high school. When I found myself getting in trouble and was arrested twice in one week for being intoxicated, I knew I had to do something.

"The second time I was arrested, I woke up in jail and didn't know how I got there. I was in a blackout and did not know for years what had happened. I know I was hanging around with the wrong crowd and going to all the wrong places. I could see a life in prison coming at me fast.

"When I was released from jail, I had made up my mind. I went right around the corner and told an army recruiter that I needed help and I needed to get out of town. I told him my story and he helped get my charges, including breach of peace and stolen cars, waived."

Lamb made it out of town. Big time. Writing from somewhere near Tong Binh province, Republic of Vietnam, 1966, he gives this partial account of his first battle.

"In the pitch black, just before dawn, the blast shook the night, KARAABOOMMMMOOOM!!!! It was followed immediately by an endless staccato of machine gun and AK-47 fire. That steady noise was punctuated by the KRRUMMPP of 40-mm shoulder-launched rockets that flashed in explosions all around.

"The flashes, briefly pushing back the blackness of night, were quickly extinguished by the suffocating blanket of night as two companies of North Vietnamese soldiers overran our outposts, fire control center, communications center and one gun parapet in one swift stroke. We could not see but we heard death approaching.

"At the moment of the first deafening explosion, there was the sound of a man screaming, and the sound was inhuman. It sounded like a dog that had been hit by a car. The howling of that man caught in the agony of death's grip was different from the steady screams of horror on the battlefield that night.

"Later we found him. He was shot once in the side, a small entry wound, a large exit wound. It was the mark of an M16 round spinning through the body.

There was also a large hole in his head, provided by the first sergeant who emptied a full clip of M16 rounds on full automatic, the muzzle pressed into the eye of the still moaning victim.

"The first sergeant turned to me, smile and said, 'Lamb, next time we catch one alive, I'll show you how to castrate `em.'"

At the end of his tour, Lamb wrote, "War is more terrible than you can imagine. Had it not been for the diivine intervention of God, I would be dead. I know that God saved my life in Viet Nam at least seven times, including the battle described above."

This is what the Army said about Lamb's first battle: "private first class Lamb distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions near Tong Binh, Republic of Vietnam."

When he returned home, Lamb writes, "I got married, joined the Church and thought I was going to settle down and preach the gospel. After two years, at age 23, the rebellious, irresponsible, self-centered me showed up, and I began drinking and ultimately went wild."

From the age of twenty-three until he went into The Delancey Street Foundation treatment center in San Francisco in 1988, Lamb went down a spiral staircase of bad choices, pain, lost jobs, marital infidelity, madness, heroin, crack and cocaine addiction, numerous hospitals, drug and alcohol programs, accidents, attempts at recovery and frequent tips to jail.

April Fool's day in 1985 is a good example.

"Back in the early '80's," Lamb said, "my partner in business and I drove from New Haven to Bridgeport, Connecticut to get a better quality and price for heroin.

"When we arrived, we drove down the main strip of a large housing project. People were out there conducting business as usual, and anything and everything was for sale if you knew who to ask and who to approach. Shooting galleries, dope houses, crack houses and houses of ill repute were all there if you knew where to go or who to ask.

"I waited in the car while my partner went inside an apartment to make a buy. No problem, he was back in the car with the score and we were on our way out of the project's. Suddenly he said 'let's get some cocaine; I want to do some dope on the way home.'

"At first I said 'no, we got the dope. We can get some 'caine when we get back.' He insisted, and I gave in. We drove back, only this time he bought the cocaine on the street. It was a mistake. As it turned out, the police had surveillance teams on the roofs with squad cars and plain cars out of sight.

"On the way out of the projects, I saw the motorcycle cop come around the corner with the lights on. He was the biggest cop I think I have ever seen. I jumped out of the car and saw him kick down the kick stand and step over the bike.

"He strolled over to me in long strides in his calf high spit shined leather riding boots, grabbed me by my arm and spun me around and up against the car in one sweeping motion. I banged into the car as he took my wrists one at a time to 'cuff me. My partner had jumped out of the car and tried to throw the dope down a drain, but three plain clothes men intercepted him.

"After the ride in the paddy wagon, with the laughter of the police ringing in our ears, the cops put us in a filthy cell. The toilet was full of vomit, human waste and who know what else. The smell was overpowering. Once again, I made a sad call to my wife.

"In 1988 I found Delancey Street, a residential self-help organization for substance abusers, ex-convicts, the homeless and others who have hit bottom. The average resident has been a hardcore drug addict for 16 years, abusing alcohol and multiple drugs and has dropped out of school in the seventh grade and has been institutionalized several times. I fit in.

"Run by CEO Mimi Silbert, Delancey Street, which has four other facilities around the country, doesn't go in much for lectures, videos, steps or classes. One of the very first set of principles you learn when you walk in the door is work hard, keep a good attitude and don't get caught up, meaning do not argue.

"It doesn't cost anything to be accepted in the program. The only prerequisite is that you have truly hit bottom and have a sincere desire to change your life. It is based on a philosophy which says, 'act as if, and you will become.'

"Delancey Street operates like a commune in that all the businesses produce training and funds that keep the program going. There are no government funds involved. This is intended to give everyone a sense of involvement in his or her own recovery. In short, residents earn respect by doing the right things and paying for their recovery as they pave the way for others.

"I was able to go to college, Seminary and UC Berkeley while still in the program. I owe Mimi Silbert and the Delancey Street family a debt that can only be repaid by doing the best I can do each and every day and to help others along the way.

"One day while contemplating my efforts in the American Baptist Seminary of the West, I was confronted with the challenge of continued education in a unique way.

"I was standing there on campus overlooking both the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge with San Francisco in the distance as a picture perfect backdrop. I was thinking that just four years before that I was thinking that I was going to be pushing a shopping cart down the street with a wine bottle in my back pocket, mumbling to myself.

"Being a counselor and supervisor is what I was born to do. My misery has become my ministry. Out of the pain I endured and created, I am now able to be an example of what could be for anyone who will use the same energy they use to get high, to do the right thing. If you do the right thing, good things will happen to you, with God's help."

Reverend Lamb lived in Pine Bluff with his wife Lashauna and a step daughter, Carmen. Another stepdaughter is married and a third lives in Little Rock.