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Assistant Maintenance Manager Sal Llamas works full time at Metro by day and moonlights as a full-time college student.



Photo by Jimmy Stroup

Full Time Isn't Full Enough for Assistant Maintenance Manager

By JIMMY STROUP

(Jan. 9, 2008) Sal Llamas is the newly-promoted assistant maintenance manager at San Gabriel Valley Division 9. He works the early shift, rising at 4:20 a.m. each day to help keep more than 200 coaches maintained and running.

That's not enough to keep the self-described "adrenaline junkie" fully engaged. So he decided that he'd go into an accelerated business program to earn his college degree.

And Llamas is also father to 8-year-old Izabel and 6-year-old Melenie and husband to his wife, Silvia.

"I like to be active," Llamas says. "I'm not complacent about what I have or what I'm doing. I always want to be doing more or improving things."

Llamas has been with Metro for more than seven years, beginning as a supervisor after leaving the Marine Corps, where he had been a staff sergeant assigned to the motor pool. Llamas served eight years on active duty.

Out and back in again

No longer a Marine, Llamas focused on his new wife, baby, and career at Metro. But after Sept. 11, Llamas' sense of national responsibility was rekindled and he re-enlisted into the Marine Corps Reserves.

"I figured something was going on," he says. "I had lots of friends in the unit, guys who were still in, and I kept in contact with my friends. I knew eventually they were going to end up getting deployed and I wanted to get back in and help."

In Jan. 2003 Llamas found himself deployed to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

His duties took him across Iraq during the initial invasion, but in April 2003 he was sent home because of a family emergency. When home, his daughter Izabel – only 4 then – pleaded with him not to leave. Llamas returned to Iraq, but not without personal turmoil.

"That was the hardest thing I've ever experiences in my life," he says. "That was harder than combat, looking into my daughter's eyes and telling her than I had to go because it was my job."

Llamas planned to remain in the Marine Corps Reserves because he would only need 12 years of reserve duty to qualify for all the benefits of a military retirement.

"But to me, that was selfish," he explains. "I'm out there, in combat, exposing myself and risking leaving my wife as a young widow with two young daughters. I swore that if I made it back alive, I'd leave the military for good and focus my attention on my family and on my career here at Metro."

'We managed to pull through'

Llamas says the silent support of Silvia in accepting whatever decision he made was the glue that kept him together through the rough times of separation and combat.

"I know I put her through a lot. She had to be [home] by herself, taking care of the kids and seeing everything on the news unfolding," he says. "That was a really tough year for us, 2003. But we managed to pull through."

Upon his return, Llamas turned his attention to an old goal – college. He and Silvia both decided to attend an accelerated night program that would enable them to retain their jobs and maintain their time with their daughters.

"My wife and I have always wanted to set and example for our children – that's the main reason why we're doing this," he says.

Llamas' weekdays are filled with work and school now. Sundays are generally homework days – kids alongside adults. Saturdays are reserved for family activities and fun; a respite from the busy week.

The edge of 'too busy'



Melenie, 6 (in front), and Izabel, 8, are the main reasons why Llamas decided to forego a career in the Marine Corps Reserves and instead focus on his work at Metro. The girls routinely do their homework alongside their parents.

He says the demanding schedule keeps him focused and that being on the edge of “too busy” keeps him sharp and able to perform at his peak.

“The first two months of school were really difficult, but that was because we didn’t have our time management laid out yet,” he says. “After the second month we figured it out and now it’s routine.”

The new assistant manager has big plans for Metro, too, anticipating that new technologies the agency uses will come with new processes and hurdles for Metro to overcome, he says.

One area that Llamas and his division are working on is a standard process of operation for each division’s maintenance shop. That’s the Marine in Llamas peeking through....

“I don’t see too much of a difference here, to be honest, between [Metro] and the Marine Corps,” he says. “It’s not as regimented, sure, but a lot of the same skills I used in the motor pool are directly applicable to Metro.”

“If we don’t get everything in order here in maintenance, then the bus doesn’t go out, the public doesn’t have a ride and it all goes downhill from there. It’s a tremendous amount of pressure for both the leaders and the employees,” he says. “But we do it. And we’ll keep it up, too.”