*For Immediate Release*

# Facing the Fallout: Veterans battling addiction find sobriety, community in Harris County Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court

*Nov. 11, 2026* — It was 2 a.m. A cold early morning in late November. Joachim Lohan had little more than a pair of disposable paper scrubs to keep him warm as he stood outside the Harris County Jail, waiting for his wife to pick him up.

A 26-year Navy veteran, Lohan normally drank alone, but he'd joined co-workers at a bar the night before. He played pool and had a few beers, chasing them with three shots of Jameson.

He was one red light and two stop signs away from his neighborhood when he saw flashing red and blue lights ahead. He thought he was being cautious when he drove around the road closure. Instead, he slipped between two barriers and came face to face with a police officer.

He was arrested and charged with Driving While Intoxicated — his second in less than four years.

"I was hitting my head against the back seat of the vehicle. I was so embarrassed… It wasn't pretty," he said, explaining how he broke down when they put him in the patrol car. "I said, 'Lohan, what the [expletive] did you just do?'"

Hours later, his wife drove him home to Katy in silence.

"I knew then that something had to change — and it had to be me," he said.

The 65-year-old combat veteran is soon to graduate from Harris County's Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court, a second-chance program for veterans facing criminal charges and suffering from long-lasting effects from their time in the military.

Veterans who participate in the intensive and highly structured program must be diagnosed with a mental health disorder or substance abuse issue related to their military service. They also must submit their military discharge status, offense explanation, resume, and non-family recommendations.

The court works hand-in-hand with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to expedite access to treatment. Graduates of the yearlong program often have their cases dismissed and records expunged, giving them a fresh start at a successful, sober life.

"It's a kind of damage that we'll never understand, and that the average person has not experienced," said Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court Judge Juanita Jackson, describing the trauma that many veterans bring home with them. "They have been taught — and they've been rewarded — to not deal with it. To pretend it didn't happen."

***Praise over punishment***

Unlike traditional court proceedings, which can feel adversarial, Veterans Treatment Court is more team-oriented, with everyone working together toward a common goal.

The program has four phases. During the first phase, veterans go before the court every two weeks — a time commitment that decreases as they advance through the program.

Judge Jackson, unlike her predecessors, is not a veteran. She said she considers that an advantage. During her two years presiding over the court, she has reinforced praise over punishment, preferring to emphasize joy and success over failure.

Before each docket, Judge Jackson meets with the team of caseworkers and attorneys to review each veteran's progress and setbacks. During docket, she never takes the bench, instead preferring to stand in the well, close enough to talk directly to the group.

She uses praise reports to highlight those doing well in the program. She sends handwritten notes, gives hugs, provides small prizes, and celebrates sobriety milestones.

When she needs to address a non-compliance issue, she brings the veteran up and they sit facing each other, knees nearly touching, as the group watches and listens. She asks them questions: What's wrong? How did we get here? What can we do to make it better?

"I talk with them and hold their hands," she said, noting that many are dealing not just with trauma-related addiction, but life stressors like divorces, unemployment, medical issues, unhealthy relationships, and the death of family members. "They'll cry, and I cry with them. I hold them, and I say, 'We're gonna get through this. We're all here for you.'"

She rarely orders jail time or community service, she said, because she doesn't believe it helps someone facing addiction.

"Our veterans have served their country. So why would I tell them they've got to do eight hours picking up trash?" she asked. "They've already served."

Instead, she has veterans spend a day observing court and then report on what they've learned. She also assigns written reports on mental health issues and treatments.

"I just thought the formula was wrong. We've got veterans that we know have really serious mental health and addiction problems," she said. "And when they relapse, which is what you do when you are trying to get control of your addiction, you send them to jail for three days?"

***'Some don't make it home'***

A retired Navy chief, Lohan arrived at his first duty station in Newport, Rhode Island, just before Christmas in 1980. He was later recruited for elite chemical warfare training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri — home of the Army Chemical Corps, famously known as the Green Dragons. The specialized training led to his attachment to units in the Middle East, where he spent 15 years on and off.

He deployed four times, the last a 19-month tour in Afghanistan. He was honorably processed out in June 2007, shortly after he returned from his last deployment. He had declined to seek a higher, more political role, choosing instead to remain a chief, so he could support junior sailors.

Lohan saw plenty of death and carnage during his 26 years, but it was the memories of the men and women who didn't make it that haunted him.

"Along the way, you meet people, and some don't make it home," he said, recalling how he knew the families of the service members by the family photos they proudly displayed and then safely tucked away in helmets and sleeping areas. Some never made it home. He did. "You know, you wonder sometimes, when you make it home, uh, why me?"

Drinking was familiar territory for Lohan. His brother, father, and grandfather were alcoholics, and all died of cirrhosis by 75.

When he left the military, he was told he needed to get "plugged in" with the VA. But that's when the survivor's guilt would kick in. Standing in line, he'd see a younger man in a wheelchair or missing a limb, thank them for their service, and offer them his spot. Before he realized it, he'd gone from third in line to 12th. Eventually, he'd leave, telling himself he'd come back another day. The pattern repeated for years.

"I didn't know how injured I was because mine wasn't physical," said Lohan, who was in his 40s at the time. "So, I just kind of put it in a box and walked away."

It was an incident on Memorial Day, one of his hardest days of the year, that finally sent him back to the VA. Every year, he'd don his uniform and go drink, he said, thinking he was honoring his fallen service members. That year, a retired airman

who lived across the street from Lohan found him passed out in his truck, parked in his driveway with his driver's side door wide open.

"He woke me up. I was embarrassed," Lohan said, recalling the day. "I made a promise to my wife at that time. I will at least get plugged in."

He kept it. He filled out the paperwork and answered questions. And then he didn't go back.

***'It was devastating'***

Monica Apolinar was 27 when she joined the Navy in February 2021. By that October, the newly minted operations specialist was arriving at her first duty station in Rota, Spain, eagerly anticipating the arrival of her ship.

That day, she said, everything that could have gone wrong did. She didn't get picked up by her assigned Navy sponsor. She didn't yet have a cell phone because of the move. She was left behind by a training school roommate she'd traveled with. She ended up at a bar, where she said she got "loopy."

Apolinar said she woke up the next morning with hickeys covering her neck and face and little memory of the night before. She had been drugged and sexually assaulted, she said, and she hadn't even set foot on her ship yet. She had a vague memory of the man's face but didn't know who he was, only that he'd been aboard her sister ship, which was leaving Spain. She never saw him again.

When her ship arrived a couple of days later, she boarded, ready to introduce herself — only to find out everyone already knew exactly who she was.

"The person that did it took pictures that night, and they had a group chat," she said. "Basically, people knew me before I walked in the ship."

Within two months, Apolinar recognized she had a problem. With no one to talk to aboard the ship, she headed to a bar every time the ship hit a port. At first, she drank with others. Eventually, she was blacking out. Then, she was drinking alone.

Aware of the assault and her drinking, the Navy barred her from leaving the ship for six to eight months, hoping it would prevent her from drinking, she said. It didn't. Within a year, she was given a general discharge under honorable conditions for refusing to follow orders — specifically, she said, the order not to drink.

Apolinar's still angry that the Navy knew she was depressed and being harassed, but rather than acknowledging her mental health issues, they punished her for drinking. She had dreamed of joining the military since middle school and was in ROTC all through high school.

"I was ready to be in the military for the full 10 years," she said. "It was really heartbreaking for me to lose that."

***Can I live my life sober?***

Lohan's first DWI came in 2021. He was drinking to numb the pain when a song on the radio took him to a dark place. He told himself he could make it home, but he didn't.

After his second DWI in 2024, he came home from jail and tossed out all the alcohol in his house — even the Woodford Reserve he liked to drink on cold days. He kept just one beer — a Modelo, the beer that was always stocked in his garage fridge. Some days, he had as many as four beers scattered across his yard, one within reach of every spot he was working in.

He wrapped the remaining beer in duct tape and wrote the date on it — Nov. 29, his first day of sobriety. It remains in the fridge, a constant reminder of how far he has come every time he reaches for a bottle of water.

Lohan was 10 months sober when he started Veterans Treatment Court in 2025. Even though he hadn't had a drink since his arrest, he still wondered: Can I live my life sober?

The specialty court connected him to resources he didn't know existed. And like a good chief, he treated its requirements like a job, taking detailed notes, making checklists, and keeping an appointment book. Lohan was so impressed by the

program's required 16 weeks of group therapy that he scheduled one-on-one sessions with the therapist who led it, sharing things he'd never told anyone.

At the end of November, Lohan will mark his second anniversary of sobriety. He's on track to graduate from the program in December.

"The mental health stuff that you're dealing with — the traumas, the bad dreams, maybe some health issues — they don't go away just because you wake up one day going, 'Hey, I got my, I got my six-month coin,'" he said. "It's almost more intensified, because you're not medicated anymore."

Lohan is still in therapy, learning to forgive himself and trying to figure out how to let go. He sometimes wishes he could write the word "guilt" on a piece of paper and throw it in the fire and have it be gone. But he knows it doesn't work that way.

"I'm grateful. Will I live forever? No. I've embraced that," he said, noting that he has a newfound sense of hope and positivity. "But you know what? I'm sober, and that's a big deal to me, knowing that in the history of the men in my family, no one lived past 75."

***Light at the end of the tunnel***

Apolinar's transition to civilian life was hard. Back home, she was depressed, couldn't find a job, and was too ashamed to tell her family what had happened. She knew she needed help but wasn't ready to quit drinking.

"I essentially came back a failure … to my family," she said. "I didn't want them to know."

In July 2024, she was charged with Driving While Intoxicated after rear-ending another vehicle on her way home. She hadn't been drinking that day, but she'd had more than enough the night before for it to still be in her system.

"I was this close to getting home safely," said Apolinar, now 33. "But if that didn't happen, I wouldn't be where I am now."

It was pure luck, she said, that the judge presiding over her DWI case was a veteran. He told her about Misdemeanor Veterans Treatment Court and she applied, starting in July 2025. By then, she said, she felt only relief that help was finally coming. She has been sober since Sept. 3, 2025.

The community, she said, saved her. Now in Phase 3, Apolinar has connected with benefits she didn't know she was qualified for and gained a vast support network, including Judge Jackson. Twice, she said, the judge has pulled her aside after hearing that she was struggling.

They've talked through the end of a relationship involving domestic violence, her struggles with sobriety, and the stress of going back to school. During their most recent encounter, the judge hugged her, told her it would be OK, and urged her to fight for herself, stressing that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

And there is light. Now pursuing an accounting degree at the University of Houston-Downtown, Apolinar knows how much worse things could have been if she hadn't found the program when she did.

"I really think that maybe I wouldn't be alive," she said.

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