

## Mount Airy man making national impact

Gene McMahon takes healing seriously.

As an acupuncturist in Mount Airy he helps people recover from physical ailments.

But he has a special interest in U.S. veterans, and the emotional healing some don't even know they need.

To help them, McMahon conducts workshops and retreats to bring veterans together to begin the healing.

One such retreat took place on a recent Sunday at the Gaia Healing Center that he and his wife, Dr. Marianne Rothschild, own in Mount Airy.

In the building where the ceremony took place, encouraging signs speckle the walls: "Welcome Home," and "Thank you for your service."

It's the closing ceremony for Vets Journey Home, the unique weekend program created by veterans for veterans, a place to be accepted, said McMahon, executive director of the program.

Volunteers come from all over: New Jersey, California, Virginia, Pennsylvania. McMahon stands before the audience of friends and family, volunteers and vets, clad in the dark green T-shirt.

The ceremony is reverent and serious, sometimes silent in the room as the ceiling fan clicks above, yet laughter often punctuates the service as inside jokes are traded and good-natured jabs to differing branches of the military are punched.

McMahon's co-leader Teresita Fawcett asks a graduating veteran for a hug after telling him that she was impressed at his deep sense of care for the men in his service.

Gene asks for a hug too. "By the way," he tells the audience. "We give hug lessons on Friday night."

Bill Sims, an 80-year-old veteran of the Vietnam and Korean wars who was told during the ceremony that he demonstrated that vets are "never too old to share and grow," was prodded by friends and family to attend.

He said he appreciated the opportunity to give and take with fellow veterans and volunteers in the program.

Vietnam vet Don Jestes of Ellicott City said he heard about the program through a fellow veteran he met online after arranging to buy an auto part.

"I know that I needed something; I've known a long time I needed something," he said at the ceremony when given a chance to speak. "I didn't know where to go."



Bill Ryan/The Gazette

Gene McMahon of Mount Airy folds the flag with fellow veterans during a Vets Journey Home closing ceremony at the Gaia Retreat Center in Mount Airy on May 3. McMahon, who completed two tours in Vietnam, volunteers to lead a support group for others to talk about their experiences. "It's kind of like bringing my brothers back home," he said.

"I have spent a pretty rough 40 years trying to find out what happened and why," Jestes said as he faced the audience, which included his wife and son. "They showed me how to find it."

That's what it's all about for McMahon, the organizer of Vets Journey Home.

McMahon did two tours in Vietnam. "That's why I do it," he said. "It's kind of like bringing my brothers back home."

He said many Vietnam veterans had to hide where they had been. "We became ashamed of our service," he said. "No vet should feel like he did wrong."

Teresita Fawcett, McMahon's co-leader for the weekend said McMahon's combination of experience as a vet himself, intuition, passion and mission that makes him so good at what he does.

"He understands, he gets it," she said. "It's a huge piece that he gets it."

Volunteer David Morganstein called McMahon "spectacular."

"I always see transformation," he said. "The world needs a lot of healing... that's clear. Gene and Marianne do that."

The program started out as the Bamboo Bridge more than 20 years ago by a different veteran, welcoming home mainly Vietnam vets, but changed to "Vets Journey Home" with the onslaught of Middle Eastern veteran's coming home.

"This is a hidden treasure right here," Jestes said. "We came as strangers and I know we leave as friends."

At the ceremony after being addressed by the facilitators, each veteran, would walk up to a globe set on a table to the front, squinting, looking to find the far away place where they lived, lost and put their life on the line.

"This is where I was..." The globe slowly turns... a finger points to a more familiar location. "Now I'm home."

The room bursts into raucous applause.

And if Gene McMahon has it his way, many more will follow.

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For more information on Vets Journey Home:

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