

Separating the warrior from the war:

Vets Journey Home program offers emotional healing, support

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Don Jestes looked at the black-and-white photo of himself at 19 -- A U.S. soldier in Vietnam; drafted. Rebel, a German shepherd, is with him.

They were a team, scouting the jungles for booby traps. You can feel Jestes' intensity, the stress of days without sleep. You can see it etched in his face, in his eyes.

He knew the risks. When he deployed to Vietnam in 1968, he didn't tell his parents what his assignment was.

He knew it was best to not get too friendly with any other soldiers. But he did. They were buddies and fellow dog handlers. "He watched my back and I watched his."

Jestes came back home. His friend was killed. "Life was ripped out of him. It was May 13, 1968."

He now realizes that's when the intense anger began; an anger he's lived with for 40 years. "At 19, I thought I could control that emotionally. I didn't know how to let it go when I came home," he said. "I don't want to deal with the anger anymore.

"My family suffered from it ... everyone around me," said Jestes, now 60 and living in Ellicott City. "It wasn't until 10 o'clock today I realized what happened to me on May 13, 1968, changed my life, and not for the better."

Jestes spoke these words following the graduation ceremony for the participants in the Vets Journey Home program, a weekend of emotional healing held earlier this month at Gaia Healing Center, near [Mount Airy](#), for combat veterans and others who have experienced the trauma of war. The program was founded by Vietnam veteran Gene McMahon.

Jestes' experience is common among veterans, said McMahon, an acupuncturist. "All vets know this -- you don't get too close to anyone (in war), you only get so close and no closer. Losing someone is too painful," he said. "But that carries out into after the war. A lot of vets have difficulty with intimate relationships -- you'll only get so close. It helped in war," but not in marriage or family relationships.

McMahon served two tours of duty in the late 1960s; both were on river patrol boats. "I didn't get welcomed home (from the war). I kind of hid that I was a Vietnam veteran.

"I was expecting my dad, who was a World War II veteran, to ask about my experience, but he didn't," McMahon said. "I learned to shut up and not talk about it."



Photo by Graham Cullen

Vietnam veteran Don Jestes of Ellicott City is comforted by Gene McMahon, founder of Vets Journey Home during a ceremony concluding the weekend program.

A safe weekend

Twenty years ago, he attended a similar emotional healing program for Vietnam veterans, called the Bamboo Bridge, and became involved with that program until 2004 when he took it over and rewrote it as Vets Journey Home, for veterans of any war.

"We feel that it's a safe weekend for them to express their emotions," said McMahon. "That starts Saturday morning with the volunteer staff explaining why they are there.

There's usually a lot of tears. The vets get to see that the staff are there for the vets' healing, but (the staff) also experience healing." Some are veterans themselves or have a loved one who is, or have lost a loved one to war. All are volunteers and paid \$50 to cover the expenses for themselves and the participating veterans.

Co-instructor Teresita Fawcett was there because of a desire to support the vets. Her father was a World War II veteran, but he never talked about it. Two of her brothers, her ex-husband and her fianc? were veterans. "We never talked about it," said Fawcett, who is a grief counselor in Berkeley Springs, W.Va.

"I never had the opportunity to connect with them on this level," Fawcett said. "That's when I realized vets don't typically talk about it. That's the biggest gift we give them (at Vets Journey Home). They can talk about it. We listen to the vets and vets listen to vets."

She said, in combat, veterans were put in traumatic situations they didn't want to be in and "sometimes, these traumas, they caused them." Once back home, they may feel shame or guilt because they've lost people they had bonded with ... "multiple losses in a condensed version; trauma after trauma after trauma. They lived it 24/7," Fawcett said.

"They have to separate the war from the warrior. That was one of my personal journeys as someone who is against war," Fawcett said. She would also like to see programs like this for significant others of veterans because "they are dealing with it, too."

Helping someone else

Billy Sims, 80, of [Middletown](#), retired from the U.S. Army in 1973, after 36 years of service, including in Korea, Vietnam and Germany. Sims said he didn't have any issues following his return from war, but then again he stayed in service with people who shared his experiences; understood. He said that helped.

"I came to see if I could help someone else. It's always interesting and educational to hear some of the other people's stories," he said.

One activity was for each of the five participating veterans to write two letters of forgiveness -- one to himself and one to people he thought he had let down or "owed an apology to for things you had done or not done," Sims said.

He wrote a letter of apology to a young warrant officer who was with him on a mission and was killed in Vietnam. "He was going to go home in a month," Sims recalled. "He was killed instantly" in an aviation accident. "I felt I should have taken the plane myself."

Vietnam veteran Jack Graff is 78 now. From 1966 to '67, he was based in Thailand and flew over North Vietnam. He retired from the Air Force 34 years ago. He said there are not enough programs like this. "There's so many people who need it."

Graff came from his home in San Diego to participate. The first time he came was as a veteran in need of emotional healing. Now he's on staff.

"We all have memories; some of which are not positive, that cause us to react in certain ways to certain stimulus that we don't quite understand," Graff said. "Here, we can get to the root of our 'shadows,' recognize them, but they don't go away."

"The effects of war and seeing your friends die and the enemy die; it changes people. Nobody's the same when we come back from war," Graff said. "It makes us less than we could be with our family, marriage and relationships. Understanding why we do that can be useful."

He said the program helps veterans deal with the "bugaboo" of guilt about why you survived and others didn't and second-guessing decisions made in combat. "That guilt shouldn't be there," he said.

"We don't try to psychoanalyze. We try to give veterans a forum to talk about anything that happened and to listen to themselves talk." Sometimes, he said, saying it and hearing it can bring understanding.

A veteran's welcome home

Rows of folding chairs filled the room at Gaia Healing Center. Family and friends came to honor their husband, father or friend who participated in the program. On the walls were hand-printed posters: "Welcome Home." "God Bless You." "Welcome Home: I Honor You. I Honor Your Service."

"No veteran should have to feel he's done something wrong," said McMahon during the opening of the graduation ceremony that closed the Vets Journey Home weekend. "He has to separate the warrior from the war."

Each veteran received a "welcome home" hug and a "Proud Service" pin designed by a former Marine. Its design included a black onyx bar representing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.

Trent Coyle, 26, of Colorado, served in the Army for six years and was deployed to Iraq for 15 months and Afghanistan for about a year.

"I feel compelled to mention my inherent cynicism and skepticism about these events," Coyle spoke after receiving his pin. "I felt I could handle things that happened to me on my own. But at the suggestion of some people, I came," he said. "I think real progress was made in the company of other veterans."

Jestes told how his search for a tailgate led him to the program. The man he bought it from was also a Vietnam veteran and told him about the program.

"I have spent a pretty rough 40 years trying to find out what happened and why. Probably in 21½ days here, they showed me how to find the answer. This is a hidden treasure. There are so many people out there suffering ..." he said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Tears are OK here," McMahon told him.

"We came in here as strangers but we're leaving as friends," Jestes said.

The ceremony ended as every veteran present was invited to participate in folding the U.S. flag into which the participants had placed their letters of forgiveness.

Those letters, with the veterans' permission, will be placed at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and become part of its archives.

Jestes said his problem wasn't "fixed" in the weekend, "but I know I can fix it. It wasn't a revelation of a religious sort; it was a sigh of relief. Hopefully, I can pull my life together and make my life easier," he said, adding he plans to return as a staff member.

"What happened, happened. I'm not walking point in Vietnam anymore," Jestes said. "I don't have to be in total control.

Vets Journey Home

A homecoming of honor is what Gene McMahon wants to give veterans through the Vets Journey Home program. McMahon, a Vietnam veteran, knows the struggles veterans face when they return home from war. He founded Vets Journey Home to give emotional healing to veterans or anyone who has experienced the trauma of war.

Vets Journey Home is held in cities around the country and at Gaia Healing Center, near Mount Airy, where McMahon and his wife, Dr. Marianne Rothschild, are "stewards" of the land. There is no cost for veterans to attend the program here, but volunteer staff are asked, but not required, to pay \$50 each to participate, to help cover costs and make it possible for veterans to attend at no cost.

In other cities, Vets Journey Home programs are underwritten by veterans organizations and individual donors. McMahon would like to make that possible for the weekend programs held here.

For information on the program, to register or make a donation, contact Gene McMahon at 301-829-2808 or e-mail gene@vetsjourneyhome.org, or visit www.vetsjourneyhome.org.

— Susan Guynn

