

5000 West



Vol. 5, No. 1
January 2014

For employees, volunteers and patients of Zablocki and our community clinics

Secret Santas

CWT Vets donate gifts to help needy

BY GARY J. KUNICH
5000 West Editor

Jeff Hughley takes a pair of scissors to red gift wrapping paper, then cuts, tapes and folds it around a remote-controlled car he'll give to a child he doesn't even know.

He's one of about 80 Compensated Work Therapy veterans who gave hundreds of dollars of their own money to buy toys and clothes for three needy families in Milwaukee this year, and he's looking forward to the best part of the job.

"Delivering the gifts and seeing the smiles on the kids' faces, because they aren't expecting it," he said. "You know, I almost cried last year because you know you're doing the right thing when you see the need and the reaction. We went into one home last year, and the only thing I saw was a lone refrigerator, a bed and a chair, and they had five people living there."

He pauses and looks up from his gift wrapping.

"Some people don't believe there are people out there in America who need that help, but the VA helped me, and now I need to pay it forward."

Veterans in the CWT program have participated in the gift-giving program for years as a way to show they are part of the community and appreciated. Each year, they receive the names and needs of three or four families from the Boys and Girls Club, and are asked to buy one gift of about \$20.

"But look around the room," said Jerry Turner, one of the vocational rehabilitation counselors. "Most of these guys buy three, four or more gifts. They look forward to it every year. This is actually part of their therapy. It builds self-esteem, shows how important it is to give back, and how everyone is part of the community."

"For many of these guys, they want to show another side to



Photo by Gary J. Kunich

Alberto Ocanas (left) helps Jerry Turner, vocational rehabilitation counselor, and Donald Cole wrap donated gifts at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center Dec. 5.

what it's like to be a veteran. People think of veterans as just these guys who went to war, but they are more than that. Even though this is an event everyone looks forward to each year, it's also very therapeutic for the veterans, and shows them how they can make a difference."

Hughley said it's his way of showing thanks for getting back on his feet.

"The first thing the VA did was give me my health, then they gave me this opportunity," he said. "I worked for 25 years straight before I lost my job. Never even came to the VA until I had a cyst in my neck. I couldn't even breathe, and finally came in. Then I thought I could still get by on my own, and I went without work for three years, until I was, literally, in the dark. I could pay my rent, but could not pay my utilities."

CWT gave Hughley more than a job, he said. It gave him hope.

"It was a Godsend, and what we are doing here, might be the bridge these folks need to know they are loved."

All around the room, veterans showed off toys, and helped each other with the wrapping as holiday music played on a boom box in the corner.

Donald Rex showed off a Furby as he echoed Hughley's sentiment.

"Somebody gave me a chance when I needed it, so why not give back?" he said. "I'm Jewish, so it's not just the Christmas spirit, it's the right thing to do, no matter what you celebrate."

Vet forges new future despite painful past

Therapy and reaching out to help others aids her own healing from abuse

BY BENJAMIN SLANE

5000 West staff writer

Carly Johnston's scars are seen across her body — a constant reminder of an inner hell. For her, it's the unseen wounds which are the deepest.

But sometimes placing a razor or lighter to her skin eases the pain.

A scar on her chest represents a moment in her life she will never forget — infrared burns, removing a tattooed name of a former boyfriend, are what remain of her rapist.

Johnston, not her real name, is an Army veteran and is receiving treatment at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center for Military Sexual Trauma. It has been a long, ongoing, road toward recovery. Johnston bears the mental and physical scars of two rapes and a brutal beating she suffered while in the Army, and now wants to help others heal and let them know there is hope.

There has been a rising trend of sexual assaults in the military since the Department of Defense began record keeping in 2004.

According to a 2012 Defense report, more than 30 percent of women in the military have been sexually assaulted. Since 2004, reported sexual assaults increased 228 percent, according to the DOD.

Birth of a soldier

Growing up in West Bend, Wis., Johnston remembers idolizing the big Navy ships her dad sailed on. Her family all had connections to the military.

When Johnston turned 20, she enlisted in the Army.



Photo by Benjamin Slane

Carly Johnston, a Army Veteran, deals with the struggles of being a victim of sexual trauma while serving in the military.

"I always wanted to join," Johnston said. "There is something about the military that just seems right; the patriotism."

Staying at the Howard Johnson Hotel in downtown Milwaukee was a memory Johnston will never forget. For her, it was the beginning of a new life.

"It is change and going to be great. I am going to be part of something bigger than myself," she remembers thinking.

Johnston was sent to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., for Army Basic Combat Training. During the first week of training, she had second thoughts.

"I don't want to do this anymore," Johnston remembered. "It was hot in Missouri."

Her outlook changed though, with one pivotal, self-achieving, moment in basic training that still brings a smile to her face.

"We did a 6-mile run and it was the best feeling in my life," says Johnston.

Invasion

She was stationed in Germany.

Johnston and a fellow soldier were having a conversation in the barracks after work, when she said something that enraged the soldier, and he attacked her.

"It was severe. Both eardrums were ruptured, many hits to the face, a severe black eye. I almost was choked to death. Just a lot of blows to the face."

Johnston's eardrums calcified and are perforated because of the assault.

The soldier was already dealing with German law enforcement for stabbing a bar patron with a beer bottle. The prior stabbing, in conjunction with the assault on Johnston resulted in a military court-martial sentencing him two years in a U.S. federal penitentiary.

Two months later, while recovering from the beating, Johnston was raped by a fellow soldier, who then fell asleep on her

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See Trauma**

5000 West



5000 West is a recurring publication produced by the Public Affairs Office and Medical Media of the Zablocki VA Medical Center, and is intended for employees, volunteers, patients and

friends. Views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the medical center. While 5000 West encourages submissions for future editions, we cannot guarantee publication, and reserve the right to edit all copy so it conforms to editorial policy and guidelines. To submit information, e-mail: Gary.Kunich@va.gov, or call the Public Affairs Office at 414-384-2000, ext. 45363.

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Trauma

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bed.

“As soon as he fell asleep, I took off to report it,” said Johnston.

Johnston circumvented her chain-of-command, going directly to the Army’s Criminal Investigative Command.

The soldier was convicted of rape by a military court, sentenced to three years and was released back in the U.S. as a registered sex offender.

“I was one of the lucky ones,” Johnston said. “Luckily, there’s enough justice for me that something happened.”

Reporting the assault was the first step to getting the conviction and some peace of mind for Johnston.

She was cleared for deployment three months after the rape and six months after the beating. Her unit landed “boots on ground” July 4, 2007, in Iraq. She was allowed to work in the battalion intelligence office again rather than work the mailroom where she was placed after the rape.

“It was a really rough time for me. I got put in the mailroom for a really long time,” said Johnston.

The rape and beating never left Johnston. The vivid memories haunted her day in and out. She thought about it often, wondered why her fellow soldiers subjected her to such hell and inhumanity.

“No one could have made it through that with their head held high,” Johnston says. “How many soldiers you hear getting kicked out for combat PTSD?”

Johnston thought the assaults were behind her when she moved to Texas after completing her service in the Army and started dating another man six months later. She even tattooed his name across her chest. But after they broke up, he returned and raped her.

Now, she has gone through two of four treatments to have his name surgically burned from her chest. Eight inches of burns and little ink remain.

Every cut is the deepest

“We’ve been through hell,” Johnston said referring to all victims of sexual trauma.

At the time of the rape, Johnston said she was let down and there should be more support for victims of military sexual assault.

The VA offers more than 15 programs for veterans like Johnston.

“There are different types of therapy now,” said JoAnn Wolf, MST coordinator at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. “We have prolonged exposure therapy, cognitive process, group therapy and many more.”

In some cases victims of MST will use self-mutilation to feel again before getting help.

“It’s not a suicide attempt, it’s just to feel,” said Wolf.

Up and down Johnston’s arms are attempts to feel — mostly made using a razor.

“I’ve done all these through self-harm,” Johnston shows her arms. “I try not to do it, but I have an open burn right now on my leg. I did that with a lighter until it went through a lot of skin.”

The cutting has calmed in the last

“I had flashbacks every day. You’ll be fine, you’ll think you are getting better then it hits you in the face. Like cold water hits you or someone goes to tickle you and you get scared again.

“He’s living his life and I’m not, I don’t have a life to live anymore. PTSD is the worst you could ever have.”

She feels like a lucky one for the conviction of her second rapist, because The Defense Department reported less than 3 percent conviction rate for military sexual assault. Seeking more justice, she takes to the books.

As a student at University of Wisconsin - Washington County, she studies psychology. She hopes to rehabilitate criminals, specifically perpetrators of rape and sexual assault.

“Everyone is working with the victims,



Photo by Benjamin Slane

Carly Johnston shows the scars on her arm from the self-inflicted cutting to try and ease the mental pain from being sexually assaulted while serving in the Army.

couple years, the peak of it when Johnston exited the Army. For her, the more self-inflicted pain, the less emotional wounds can surface. Sometimes when using alcohol to push back pain and memories, it becomes too much and Johnston feels like she has to cut.

“I used to do it every day, now it is every few months or so,” Johnston says. “I don’t want to kill myself, but I need to get rid of the pain somehow.”

One less victim

Feeling overwhelmed with PTSD, rather than take a razor or lighter to her skin, Johnston recognized a need for something and sought help at the VA.

but no one is working with the rapist,” Johnston says. “If I can help a few of them, I can make less victims. Each one of them can be helped.”

Johnston continues to visit the Milwaukee VA for treatment and although she said can never fully recover, she feels better for the first time in more than eight years.

For more information on getting help for Military Sexual Trauma contact the Mental Health Clinic at (414)384-2000, ext. 45760.

The Enemy within

VA reaches out to let soldiers know they are never alone

BY ANTONY KAMPS
5000 West staff writer

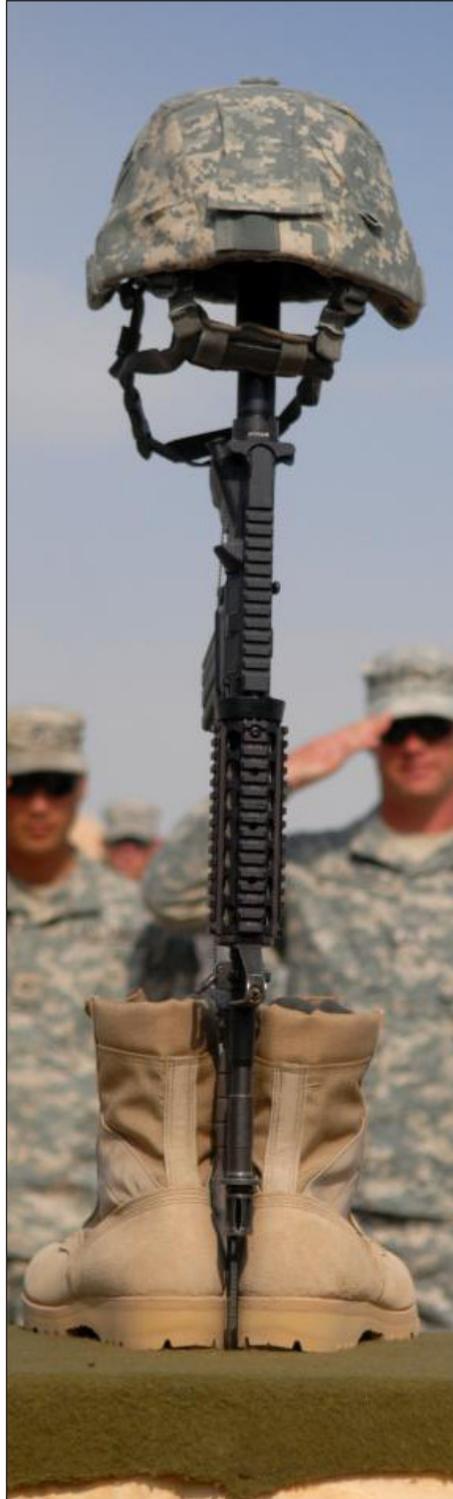
Although Veteran suicides have dropped 22 percent this year, the rate of suicide among military and Veterans remains high.

The rate of suicide among Veterans according to a recent report is more than double the rate of the civilian population; nearly one in five suicides nationally is a Veteran. Another report by the Department of Defense indicates 86 percent of suicides were committed by soldiers who never went to war. The Milwaukee VA Medical Center provides help through a variety of different programs such as Coping Understanding Support and Prevention, Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality, New Perspectives, and A New Day.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has even changed the name of the suicide hotline to the crisis hotline, to try and lift the stigma of asking for help.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs suicide prevention program:

- 22 deaths from suicide per day for Veterans
- 5 suicide related deaths per day among Veterans receiving care at Veterans Health Administration
- 950 suicide attempts per month among Veterans receiving care at VHA
- 33 percent of recent studies have a history of previous attempts



US Army photo

“The DOD has done a lot in the last couple of years trying to fix the problem,” said Gina Kangas, a clinical social worker in Mental Health at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. “They have been implementing countless programs and classes on preventing suicide.

“The reality is we can’t predict

when, or if, someone is going to commit suicide.”

There have been countless studies and analysis of reports to gauge the seriousness of suicides by soldiers.

“The problem with all the data and statistics is they’re not complete,” said Kangas. “They’re getting better at tracking the problem, but it’s far from 100 percent accurate.”

There are warning signs individuals will display which can be an indicator of a person struggling with issues. Some of the signs Kangas said to look out for are isolation, irritability, alcohol and drug abuse, and talking about mortality.

“Just a change in overall normal behavior,” she said.

Those issues could be stemming from a deployment or an incident earlier in life prior to the military.

“It’s easy to blame the military,” said Kangas. “But it goes much deeper, it starts with the family upbringing and schooling, but ultimately the military needs a better screening process.”

Military officials have said the issue of asking for help a difficult one for everyone in the military, because trainees are taught to be proud and confident and to not allow fear, or cowardice, to enter their mindset. It’s hammered into soldiers throughout training, starting in boot camp all the way up until you leave the military.

Josh Ebert, an Army Veteran, knows all too well about a friend who was too proud to come forward to ask for help.

“He was a six-foot-five, 250 pound guy, he was just a towering figure,” said Ebert. “He was the last person you thought would have problems. It’s the military lifestyle, you’re told to bottle everything up and push it down. There are times you can’t hold it in, and look to drastic solutions.

“(But) upon returning (from deployment) my best friend took his own life.”

The signs were there from Ebert’s friend.

“I knew he talked to friends about his problems, but that’s it,” said a visibly shaken Ebert.

Ebert’s story becomes even tougher when he divulged his friend texted him “call me” just three hours prior to taking his own life.

“My brother did the same thing,” said Ben Slane, an Army Veteran. “I got the

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See Enemy

“Pieces” shatters stigma of mental health

BY ANTONY KAMPS
5000 West staff writer

The stigma of a mental health diagnosis may be one reason many Veterans don't seek help.

The theatrical production “Pieces” looks to remove that stigma, while raising awareness on the subject of mental health.

The Oct. 17 theatrical production, “Pieces,” at the Milwaukee VA helped shatter the stigma and encourage those who need it most to get help. More than 200 people attended the stage production where Veterans and other actors performed monologues and interpretive dance to express the pains of mental illness and what they did to get better. It was followed by a Q and A session where the actors explained their roles and how they dealt with mental illness issues.

“Pieces” spoke first-hand to the audience about the main mental health issues facing veterans today: post-traumatic stress, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, and suicide. Organizers said the goal was to help



Photo By Antony Kamps

The cast of “Pieces” after their performance on Oct. 17 at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. From left to right, Cassandra Gresl, Jason Hillman, Rich Melcher, Emily Zakrsewski, Sedoria Outlaw, Emily Bennett, DeMar Walker, Chastity Washington and Mary Neubauer.

people not feel like outcasts by talking about the conditions and explaining they can be treated.

A 2009 study by the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center, found more than 36 percent of returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Nationally, VA

officials said about 28 to 30 percent have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. Dorothy McCollum, one of the organizers of “Pieces,” said the number that can't be determined is how many soldiers live

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Enemy

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text on Christmas day, and was busy and couldn't get back to him right away.

“I found out he killed himself the next day.”

Both Ebert and Slane acknowledged they knew their friend and brother were having problems, struggling with the mental anguish of war. In hindsight they both would have acted differently knowing the outcome; they would have made them get help.

“There is no magic answer, or words you can say to someone to get them to seek help,” said Kangas.

For Veterans like Ebert and Slane there is help for them, too, with the support group “Veterans Supporting Veterans After Suicide.” Dealing with a loved one taking their own life can be very difficult, and in some cases lead to survivor's guilt.

“It's very common for friends and

family to start having thoughts of ‘what could I have done different’ or ‘I should've done more,’” said Kangas. “That's why we have a support group for Veterans who are in that exact situation.

“It lets them know they're not alone.”

Kangas said the crisis hotline calls have increased in the past year. She attributes this to the name change from “Veterans Suicide Hotline” to “Veterans Crisis Hotline.” The Veteran calls this number and can talk to the person about any issue they are dealing with, and at their request a local social worker will contact them within 24 hours.

The ultimate goal is to eliminate suicides among Veterans. The first step is recognizing there is a problem, and the second step, arguably the hardest step, is to ask for help. It takes the strength and courage of a warrior to ask for help.

For more information on any of the suicide prevention programs call (414)384-2000, ext. 43827. If it's an immediate crisis call the Veterans Crisis Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), and then push “1.”

Or visit veteranscrisisline.net for more information.

“There is no magic answer, or words you can say to someone to get them to seek help.”

**-- Gina Kangas
Suicide Prevention Coordinator**



Photo by Benjamin Slane



Photo by Gary Kunich



Photo by Benjamin Slane

In and Around the VA

It's pretty hard to report on all the great things around our VA, but here is a roundup of some of the important events since the last issues. **PHOTOS** (Clockwise from top) Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker made his annual Veterans Day visit to the Milwaukee VA Medical Center to visit with hospitalized veterans. Harry Koroghlianian, of American Legion Post 416, prepares to post the colors at the annual Veterans Day ceremony inside the chapel. Army Veteran Jeff McNeil belts out a song in the Matousek Auditorium for the kickoff event of the 2014 National Creatives Arts Festival, which will be held this fall in Milwaukee. McNeil was a national winner who also performed two numbers at last year's national event in Reno, Nev.



Photo by Benjamin Slane



Photo by Benjamin Slane



Photo by Benjamin Slane

VA's Got Talent Show

Twenty VA employees and Veterans competed Nov. 26 in the first-ever VA's Got Talent show to raise money for the Combined Federal Campaign. PHOTOS (Clockwise from top): Saniya Coates, daughter of Erika Coates, a registered nurse in the Spinal Cord Injury department, sings "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" to the crowd. Gary Kunich, public affairs officer at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center, throws into the audience a suit coat belonging to Fred Kier, co-manager of the Rehabilitation and Extended Community Care, during his performance of Elvis Presley's "Suspicious Minds." He stayed true to the 'King,' even wiping sweat off his brow and handing the scarf to a female audience member. He took first place for his performance. Travis Suss, a pharmacist at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center, wows the crowd with his juggling ability during the show.

Shakespeare's words create feast of healing

BY ANTONY KAMPS
5000 West staff writer

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. For he today that sheds his blood with me, Shall be my brother; be ne'er so vile, this day shall gentle his condition." — William Shakespeare ("King Henry V")

There are many ways of treating mental health conditions; creative arts are used by the Milwaukee VA as a form of treatment. Mental health patients can find solace in writing, singing, or even acting. The "Feast of Crispian," uses works of Shakespeare.

The healing process is a long, and difficult, road for those dealing with depression and drug and alcohol addictions. Traditionally, people take part in group therapy or one-on-one sessions and talk about their issues. "Feast of Crispian" defies traditional treatment, instead using words from the works of William Shakespeare to deal with their issues.

"I've been in hours and hours of therapy, nothing ever reached me at the level that this did," said Tomra Gorski, a veteran and participant in the program. "I was still hiding behind my walls; if you just let it work, it's an amazing journey."

Nancy Smith-Watson, a professional actress, and one of the three facilitators of the program, talked about how the program is about therapy, not performing.

"The core work is meant to be therapeutic and not performative," said Smith-Watson. "We don't want any pressure put on the participants about talent or quality."

Smith-Watson and her husband saw how well it worked for juvenile delinquents in Massachusetts. Hearing a report about the enormous needs of Veterans in the mental health department they decided the need is more prevalent for our country's heroes.

"They're looking for a way of expressing emotions of their own, they're looking for a way of healing," said Smith-Watson. "It's a way for them to tell their story without actually telling their story."

The program wants to tap into the

emotional side of the struggles the participants are dealing with, believing this breaks down the walls they put up, walls which are preventing them from actually starting the healing process.

"I've gotten more out of those couple days then I have in months talking to my therapist," said Stanley Perry, another veteran participating in the program. "An eye-opening experience, opening up your soul and your heart because you feel so comfortable, it just breaks you down."

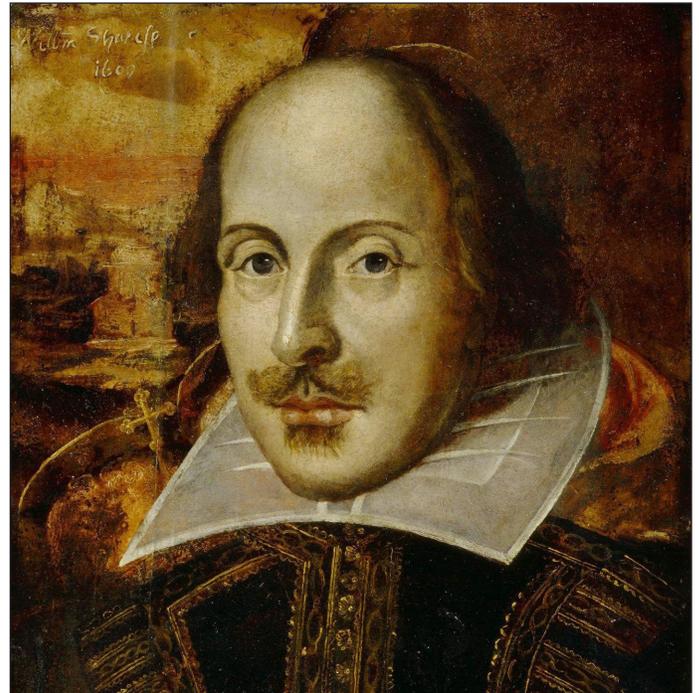
"When I say break you down it's not like they break you down, you break yourself down because it's so comfortable and at ease you open yourself up before you even realize it."

Dustin Whitworth, Navy Veteran, has struggled to deal with his addictions and homelessness. Those addictions cost him his family, something he continues to struggle with.

"I think we're all actors anyway, especially addicts as we all lie a lot," said Whitworth.

During one session Whitworth is given a line from Hamlet: "Give me my father?" Unbeknown to Smith-Watson and the rest of the group, Whitworth was only 6 years old when his father abandoned him and his family. It becomes even more poignant now with being a father himself.

"We are working with him on that, and (Dustin) finally said, 'I don't have a relationship with my father, so I don't know where to go with this'," said Smith-Watson. "The fact he is a father, he had to start thinking about that in terms of being



The works of William Shakespeare form the basis for the "Feast of Crispian" program, which helps Veterans tell their story through his ancient prose.

a father and that relationship."

The line struck a chord.

"I felt pretty broken and pretty vulnerable," said Whitworth. "All you're doing is saying lines but you don't have time to lie to them, or lie to yourself."

"Pretty powerful and intense," he said.

VA officials say the need for veterans to get help in the mental health department is at an all-time high. Many are too proud or have gone through traditional therapy, feeling it has failed in their road to recovery, making it even more difficult to sign them up. "I have never seen something touch people the way this program does," said Perry. "I am as stone as they come with a wall, but I cried like a baby most of the weekend."

Whitworth quickly followed that up by saying, "He was like a waterfall."

"I have seen a medicine, that's able to breathe life into a stone, quicken a rock, and make you dance canary with spritely fire and motion; whose simple touch is powerful to arise King Pippen." — William Shakespeare ("All's Well that Ends Well")

For more information on Feast of Crispian, or other mental health programs contact Shep Crumrine at 414-384-2000, ext. 42433.

Veteran takes fight to cancer with mastectomy

When Lise Brown discovered she had the BRCA2 gene, she made a difficult decision that changed her life forever

BY ANTONY KAMPS
5000 West staff writer

Lise Brown had a decision to make — wait for the cancer or remove her breasts before it could happen.

Brown, a Navy Veteran, tested positive for BRCA2 gene that increases her chances of developing breast cancer by up to 85 percent.

She made the choice to have a double mastectomy and breast reconstruction at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center before that could happen.

Brown found out about the gene in 2010 but took two years to make the life-changing decision.

“My mom, sister, niece, cousin, aunt, great aunt — none felt I should do what I did, which is beyond me,” said Brown. “I just don’t understand that.”

“They thought I should wait until I got cancer. Why go through the torture of chemo?” said Brown. “I felt more in charge of my life by having the double mastectomy. I like the preventive route much better.”

She said all those women have been diagnosed with some form of cancer.

Brown’s niece is fighting pancreatic cancer and Brown takes her to all of her appointments. The preventive decision was much easier when seeing her niece go



Courtesy photo

Lise Brown, a Navy Veteran, made the choice to have a double mastectomy when she tested positive for the BRCA2 gene that increased her chance of developing cancer by 85 percent.

through cancer treatments and drug trials.

“I didn’t think I was strong enough to go through what she was going through if I was diagnosed with cancer.”

The double mastectomy took place in November 2012, and the breast

reconstruction not long after. Not all women have breast reconstruction — some by choice, some because they were never given a consult.

“One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, but in that group, only three out of 10 are even offered plastic surgery consults and options,” said Sherry Wiesner, a registered nurse and plastic surgery facilitator at the Milwaukee VA.

“This is a very traumatic situation for a woman to go through, and we want them to know they have options because as more female veterans come into the VA, they need to

know we are here for them.”

Breast reconstruction was an easy decision for Brown.

“I wanted to feel as normal as possible — feel like a whole woman again,” she said.

Brown, who now lives in Florida, still makes the trek back to the Milwaukee VA Medical Center for all her surgical and follow-up treatments. The Orlando VA Medical Center is closer, but she is just too comfortable with the people at the Milwaukee VA.

“Everyone there has been absolutely wonderful, treating me like family,” said Brown. “I couldn’t have asked for better care.”

“I don’t think I would have gotten the same care at a regular hospital.”

The path to recovery has taken its toll, physically and mentally, but she’s happy with her decision.

“I feel less fearful of waking up and finding out I have cancer. That feeling is gone,” said Brown. “I never feel sorry for what I did.”

“It’s all a part of the healing process.”

For more information on breast reconstruction, call Sherry Wiesner at 414-384-2000, ext. 42118.



Courtesy photo

Lise Brown made the decision to have a double mastectomy and now is able to spend time with her grandson without worrying about being diagnosed with breast cancer.



Photo by Antony Kamps

Sedoria Outlaw wears a mask and straitjacket during the production “Pieces” to show the constraints of mental health illnesses.

Pieces

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with a mental health disorder, but don’t or refuse to get help.

“Veterans and/or civilians don’t want to be labeled as having a mental illness,” said McCollum, a social worker in the mental health department at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center. “Being labeled with a mental illness brings about internal stigma as well as external stigma.”

During the Q and A session following the show, Sedoria Outlaw, who serves in the Army, performed in the show and talked about her struggles with the confinement of a straitjacket.

“When I put on that straitjacket, I feel like I am taking on everything (mental health patients) are dealing with,” she tells the audience, pausing as she becomes visibly upset.

“When that jacket comes off,” she continued, “it’s an amazing feeling.”

Outlaw is scheduled to deploy next month.

One audience member came forward

to tell how the show had a personal effect on her.

“This is really moving and powerful for me, as today is the 16th anniversary of my brother’s suicide,” said the audience member. “People just need to know that there are people who will love and miss you, and they just need to talk to someone and get help.”

Brenda Wesley, director of education and outreach at NAMI Greater Milwaukee, said seeking help is part of the path to recovery.

“It’s a way of getting people to discuss the topic,” said Wesley. “Mental health is not a topic people like to discuss, unless they see it on TV or in a movie.

“This opens the closet door, and starts the conversation that needs to take place.” Wesley knows first-hand about dealing with mental health.

“My son is now 35 and was diagnosed at the age of 21 with schizophrenia, which has since changed to schizoaffective and alcohol and other drug abuse issues,” said Wesley.

Wesley saw the need of Veterans who are coming home from deployment in need of hearing the message of the production.

“I have family and friends that are or who have served in the Armed Forces and this is a community that needs to hear the message of recovery,” said Wesley. “Our troops come back changed and no one seems to understand why.

“(I) cannot think of a better way than to use the arts to deliver a message that most people refuse to talk about!”

For more information on “Pieces,” contact Brenda Wesley at 414-344-0447, or go to www.piecesinmyownvoice.com.

For more information on getting you or someone you know help for mental health issues contact the Milwaukee VA Medical Center at 414-384-2000, ext. 42097

Artist gives back to the Milwaukee VA with “Reflections”

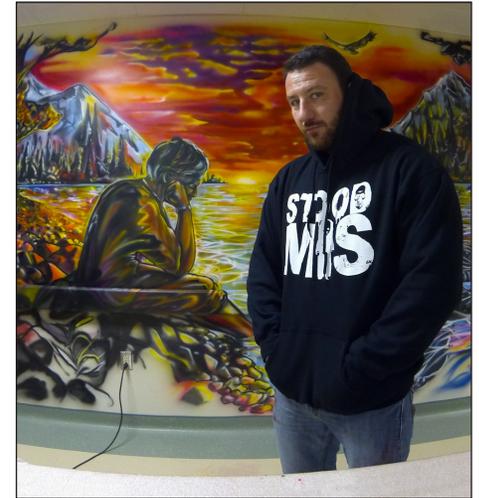


Photo by Benjamin Slane

Josh Ebert, an Army Veteran, donated 22 hours to paint a mural titled “Reflections” in the newly refurbished 3C at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

BY ANTONY KAMPS
5000 West staff writer

Josh Ebert, an Army Veteran, wanted to give back to the Milwaukee VA Medical Center, and he did the only way he knew how — with art.

Ebert is a professional artist, with his own company, Misunderstood Art. He also receives care at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

Using his artistic abilities, Ebert painted a mural for the newly built inpatient mental health unit located on 3C. The painting is titled “Reflections,” as it depicts a soldier sitting on the shore seeing the reflections of his battle buddies in the water.

“The VA has done a lot for me,” said Ebert. “They would jump through hoops for me, and I felt I needed to give back in some way.”

The idea to have him paint the mural came from Erin Bullock, combat case manager at the Milwaukee VA.

“His artistic ability and the fact he’s a Veteran made him perfect for the job,” she said.

Ebert drew on his own personal experiences while deployed to Afghanistan in 2006.

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facebook.com/MilwaukeeVA

My name is Earl...

BY ANTONY KAMPS
5000 West staff writer

Barbershops have always been the quintessential hangout spot for guys who just want to talk shop. It's a place where guys go to not only get a haircut, but have a good time.

"With the canteen right here, it's not very ideal for the barbershop hangout," said Earl Booker Jr., master barber at the Milwaukee VA. "But we'll work with it, and still have that same atmosphere."

Booker has been cutting hair for close to 40 years, and now brings his expertise to the Milwaukee VA. The barber shop is located inside the canteen, and opens at 7:30 a.m., five days a week. The line, and wait time, prove he is already making a name for himself.

It all started when Booker was 14 years old. He thought he could cut hair, and decided to practice on his younger brother.

"He had a Jheri curl at the time and I completely messed his hair up really bad," said Booker. "It took my parents two years to forgive me for that one."

"That one single situation inspired me to learn how to cut hair properly, and it turned it to a career."

There is little doubt Booker can cut hair. The compliments for his work have

been rolling in since he started in early November.

"This guy can cut anybody's hair," said Henry Spates, program manager for Canteen Services at the Milwaukee VA. "I've already had a lot of people come up to me and tell me how good he is."

Veterans and employees can now get a haircut from a master barber, but they may have to wait as Booker's chair is always occupied.

"I start cutting at 7:30 a.m., and there's always a stream of people coming in all day long," he said.

It is apparent today is no different; Booker is cutting Dave Martinez's hair, a Marine Corps Veteran, while another Veteran waits his turn. There's no magazine reading while you wait in this barbershop. You have conversations while you wait, with conversation topics ranging from sports to women or time spent overseas.

"A barber he's everything, he's your comedian, friend, even your counselor," said Martinez. "It's hard to find a good barber. Earl used to cut my hair when I was kid; it was a shock to see him here all these years later."

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See Earl



Photo by Benjamin Slane

Earl Booker Jr., a master barber, cuts the hair of Dave Martinez, a Marine Veteran, in the barbershop located inside the canteen.

Dossier

Roshan Mahendran
Assistant Environmental
Management Services chief



Courtesy photo

Hometown: Trincomalee, Sri-Lanka

Years of government service: 8

What is your ideal job? Ice cream taster.

If you could pick your own theme music, what would it be? Theme to "Superman."

What are your favorite TV shows?: "Modern Family," "The Big Bang Theory," and "Family Guy."

What TV show are you most embarrassed to admit you watch?: "Keeping up with the Kardashians."

If you were on a reality television show, what would it be?: "Duck Dynasty," because it's a multimillion dollar family business where they have fun working and they don't let their financial success change who they are. Plus they just blow up a lot of stuff!

Favorite sports and teams?: Manchester United and the Green Bay Packers.

If you could only eat one food for the rest of your life, what would it be?: Shrimp curry and rice.

Three things that can always be found in your refrigerator?: Organic Valley Chocolate milk, Stella Artois beer and Red Bull.

Do you believe in ghosts?: Yes!

Favorite type of exercise?: Trail running.

What is the meaning of life?: To live it to the fullest and not to have any regrets.

Bratwurst and beer, or filet mignon and Merlot?: I'll take both, please!

Motto you live by?: "Life is so very difficult. How can we be anything but kind." — Buddha

In Service

Congratulations to the following Zablocki employees who have reached career milestones in November and December:

25 YEARS

Mary Badger
Rayvon Bufkin
Lori Eastmead
Christine Hoefert
Robert Tautges

Carmen Greene
Craig MacWilliams
Dolores Pringle
Quencia Stewart
Mack Taylor
Eileen Wilson

40 YEARS

George Flynn

35 YEARS

Neil Mandel
Pauline Weickardt

30 YEARS

David Brees
Mary Cronin
Kathleen Fryjoff
Christine Hansen
Kim Kitzke
Pauline Ludwig
Denise Mierow
Susan Wilde
Kathleen Zibolsky

20 YEARS

Keri Brezgel
Renaldo Garrett
Wendy Hernandez
Julie Kohlhepp
D.M. Niemczyk-
Mullins
Patricia Paquin
David Pavwoski
Timothy Reichman
Alethea Sment
Miranda Stanford
Dwyilia Wright

10 YEARS

Israel Baez
Loretta Bess
Otis Billings
Sharon Crooks
Thomas Dederer
Charles Dooley
Michael Frydach
Zafar Iqbal
Gregory Kaftan
Talia Kosinski
Dawn Martin
Maxine McCain
Kavita Ratarasarn
Ukeme Ndon
Kirk Nelson
Derrick Paquette
Phillip Rettig
Michele Sikora
Ryan Williams

15 YEARS

Sheryl Briley
Vince Burgess
Marc Erickson
Ernest Giles



Photo by Gary J. Kunich

Earl Booker Jr., master barber at the VA.

Earl

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Booker knows he didn't get here alone. He hands over a list of names he would like mentioned as people who have helped him on his journey. The list has more than 35 names; one of the names is Annie Payne.

"Her nickname is 'Bibby,' and she helped me immensely," said Booker. "I'd mess up and she wouldn't laugh at me, just support me and make me work harder."

The list is too long to mention every name, and Booker understands. He just wants those people to know he is thankful for all they have done for him.

"Hey some people only have one or two people to thank," said Booker. "I have a list."

VA Voices

What's your best holiday story gone wrong?



Colleen Siekert, secretary: "There was one year where my Mom had a few too many and dropped the turkey. She was even at one point calling it 'Grandma.'"



Chinita Menefee, nursing assistant: "We went to a family friend's house all ready to have a big meal, and we get there and there is no food or any cooking utensils."



Karl Peter, VA contractor: "I went to my girlfriend's parents house, and they gave me this hideous hat. They kept taking my picture with it, and I was confused. It turned out to be a gag gift."



Erin Goldenstein, training specialist: "We go away for the first time on Christmas to Georgia to visit family. We get back and the cats have knocked the tree over."



Andrew Cleveland, pharmacist: "We're playing a heated game of 'Catch Phrase,' guys vs. girls. The guys won and one girl stands up, swears at everyone and storms out."