

Connecting with others to find a fulfilling life

Semaj: My name is Semaj. I served in the Army and I was in Vietnam. I remember it like yesterday. We were walking on this trail. He was, the Sergeant was in back of me and I stopped because the radio strap was cutting into my chest, so I said, "well let me just stop to adjust this." You can't, the line can't stop. Everything keeps moving, so they passed around me. They kept moving. There was a large explosion, and he stepped on an anti-personnel mine. Which, to date, I was never really a religious person, but at that moment, I knew that there had to be a higher force working, because if I hadn't stopped to adjust the strap, I would have stepped on the mine.

I got home, ironically around, this is crazy, on the 4th of July, which is not the best time to come home, because you've got firecrackers and stuff going off. It took me about a month or so, I stayed in the house a lot during that time. A lot of self-medication, vis-à-vis, marijuana, for the guys my age who, that was the drug of choice. I had a difficult time. I had a very difficult time adjusting.

And then I had to report back, because I still had a year of military time to complete. The transition for me from there to coming home and then to being back to assigned to Brooklyn, the drug thing was still prevalent. The marijuana stuff was still prevalent. That was still there as my source of coping.

I was 22 when I got married and my wife was 20, and we were clear after the divorce. We stayed together for three years. We weren't really connecting. Wife number two, again, it seemed like all of these relationships weaved in and out of drugs and getting high and what-have-you. And she got pregnant, we lost the baby, so that was very traumatic. Then we had another child who survived. For me, having a baby was a sobering event. It was real, this is not like something making up now, this is real.

I had a very close friend of mine who I grew up with, and interestingly enough he became a Veteran's rep. He said, "you need to look about maybe going to school, going back to school, see if you can get some kind of skills. But more so, you need to look at talking to somebody, talking to somebody at the VA." Basically, they said "well, you're definitely dealing with post traumatic stress disorder." They said, "you need to start coming in and meeting with a Therapist, Psychologist and start getting some help, some counseling, some coaching, some support."

I would get to what they call a breakthrough, and I would pull away and stop going. And then something would happen, and I'd go back. I started doing groups, I started doing one-on-one counseling, I'm having a pretty good time. I'm saying like OK, I'm making another turn now. On top of that, I got introduced to this woman, wonderful woman by the way, who I'm still married to. She was very, very, very instrumental in supporting me, you and I got into a couple of groups and then got, after going around the block a few times, got re-integrated back into the VA and started going to them on a regular basis.

You can't do it by yourself, you can't live in a cave. And I tried that, I really did, I tried to be a loner and let, and just like the world is out there and I'm in here and I'm cool. And that was the self-medication. That's not going to do it, because then you end up, you go through your whole life and you look back and you say "damn, where did 40 years go? Where did 50 years go, and what do I have to show for my life?" Because I think those Veterans, those Vietnam Veterans could be very helpful to our present young men and



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women. They need to find a place, a space where they can find some release and move forward in their lives.



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