

## Richard's substance use was related to PTSD

**Richard:** Hi, my name is Richard. I served in the United States Army from February 1966 to December 1968. I served in Vietnam, doing combat, as a combat Veteran. Fire fights were something that was really intense. It didn't scare me as much as I was cautious about stepping on a booby trap, and one of the things I was scared of more than anything else was something called bamboo whip. They would take a bamboo pole and tie it to one side of a tree and stretch it all the way as far as it can go and put a trip wire there. There was a guy, named Levon, he was standing right beside me. That bamboo whip hit him and that there, wow. I said, "How can somebody make a weapon like that?" I mean it was, it didn't just kill him, it killed something in me.

When I came back home, I was trying to get back to everyday life, but on the job, everybody wanted to hear about what'd you do in Vietnam? You kill anybody? I didn't wanna talk about it. I was trying to forget about it and so, it looked like that every day after work we would wind up at the bar and I got a beer in my hand, I got a shot in my hand, and it seemed that after about a year, or a year and a half, I began to drink more than I ever drank before. It was a way of numbing me from feeling the feelings that I had associated with being in a war and having survived and having so many friends of mine that didn't survive in the war.

After the wine and the beer and the alcohol, didn't numb me enough. I find myself experimenting with heroin. As time went on, I became addicted to heroin. I had at one point in time, I had a \$300 a day habit, so that took me into selling drugs and then sometimes when I couldn't get a supply to sell, I found myself robbing people. I saw myself committing burglaries and other thefts to support my drug habit. I generally relied on drugs and alcohol and crime and as a result of that there, I found myself going in and out of the prison system. I think it was the last time I went into the prison system was back in July of 1981 and I was given a 24 year sentence.

About a month before I came home, a guy by the name of Otis worked with the Veterans Administration in Lebanon, PA and he said, "Look man," he says, "You been down 24 years you got a history of drugs and stuff like that," he said, "The world changed." He said, "Why don't you do this here." Why don't you go to the Veterans Administration?" I got evaluated and the evaluation said that I had suspected post-traumatic stress disorder. He says, "Look man," he said, "Maybe your alcohol and your drug problem were hiding behind your PTSD, and maybe the heart of your problem may be you're trying to address and deal with your post-traumatic stress disorder." Another one of the symptoms of PTSD was the fact that I had survivor's guilt. I got treated and got on the right path when I came out of prison.

We had Peer Specialists at the medical center in Lebanon and the Peer Specialist was more than just a facilitator, this was a person that was genuine a friend. We had classes I think it was four classes a day, two in the morning, two in the afternoon and we had AA or NA at night.

It's hard for me to conjure up the reality that something happened to me over 40 years ago still has a, what you might say, a vital role in my life still today, but the difference between when I first came out of Vietnam and where I am today, is I know how to manage it. So when I see Veterans, mainly homeless Veterans or Veterans in the prison system, I'm real eager to talk to them and try to encourage them to get involved



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