

We are all in this together

Jack: My name's Jack. I was in the Marine Corps from 1963 to '67, and in Vietnam in '65 and '66.

I work with the kids at Balboa Hospital. I love them. They're the real deal, man.

Barbara: It is great for them to see somebody that they felt very comfortable with. And Jack is such a giving person.

Jack: When a kid gets out of the service, that is enormously disorienting for that young man. So what I try to do at the hospital is just sort of share my little story. When I came back to the States, I had no idea what I was feeling. I'd freeze-dried my emotions.

They sent us in December 10, 1965. And as we started down into the LZ, the groundfire was so intense everybody pulled off except for the helicopter I was in. Immediately, as I got out of the helicopter, I was shot. And we were sitting ducks. Every time anybody moved, they had heavy machine guns. And we lost some kids that night.

The whole next 12 years of my life was a gestation period that I didn't understand. Basically, drugs and alcohol is what allowed me to self-medicate until I ended up in a psychiatric hospital. I knew I had to stop what I was doing or I wasn't going to be alive.

Jack: Somehow, inside, I realized that the kids that I'd lost overseas were as old as they were going to get. And if they could talk to me, they would say, "Hey, come on, you're living for me now."

Barbara: There's still some affects of combat stress. I now recognize more instances in our relationship where he was, you know, kind of withdrawn or quiet about certain things that I just didn't understand.

He talked a lot about not wanting to be responsible for anybody or anything.

Jack: December 7, 1979, there was a sort of a bigwig meeting talking about opening the Vet Center in San Diego. And I went to that. And that first WRAP group, that basically saved my life. I got into that room and I was able to exhale. And somehow or another, we found each other, one by one, just like in the rice paddy.

Jerry: He was in the first WRAP group we did with the first Vet Center down here.

Jack: Jerry was the most seriously wounded person ever treated at Balboa Hospital. His unit was overrun—you were in country two weeks?

Jerry: Yeah.

Jack: Two weeks? Two weeks.

Jerry: Four weeks.

Jack: Four weeks.

Jerry: Yeah.



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Jack: Overrun, shot point blank twice in the head with an AK. And it was a goddamn miracle that he's here. And I'm really thankful.

For me, what worked best was the one-on-one relationship-based counselling. I saw a psychiatric nurse with the Veterans Administration, and I met with her every month until, well, currently, actually.

I don't think you can deal with the war when you're drinking. And I don't think you can stop drinking until you deal with the war. So it's almost like simultaneous.

Chris: Jack was almost like a dad, kind of, like the detachment dad. Everybody knew him. He was always there to listen, always there to help, always there to guide, because he's been through so much more than we could ever go through. And we was willing to prevent you from going through it from the lessons that he's learned, and, you know, it was awesome.

Jack: To me, the important healing comes from each other. In our case, there weren't a lot of older guys telling us, it's going to be okay, from Korea or World War Two. We kind of had to figure that out on our own.

But once we figured out, we said, hey, this is an important component. This next group of guys, we got to pass the torch to them.

Shawn: In my opinion, there's no better connection or support for these guys than the Vet-to-Vet support. And Jack and his wife both play a huge part here.

Jack: What Barbara does at Balboa is she works with the Wives' group to let them know that you can have combat stress, you can have gone through all of these challenges in life and have a strong and successful relationship. They need to know that that's a possibility.

Barbara: Okay, so let's begin. Let's start with our legs crossed, shins crossed in the center. As I was working with the wives, a little lightbulb went off in my head, like, hey, it would be so great if we could actually have yoga classes here for the wives, for the service members, because I knew how much it had helped me in my life and Jack in his life. And I knew we could help not just with the stress but in helping them with sleep problems, pain management.

Jack: The beauty of yoga, why it was attractive to me, was it brought me back here, right here, right now. So yoga's a natural to these kids.

Why I go down to the hospital and love these kids that much is because I know that once they get on top of this, there's nothing they can't do. It's a completion of a circle.

My guys are here with me ... they're all here. You know? And I really feel that. I feel that.

So, going to the hospital completes that circle, for me, personally. For those kids, I just want them to know that I completely and totally honor what they've done.



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Barbara: If it's a Vietnam era Veteran, it's been so many years now, it's just very hard for them to talk about their experience or their feelings. They probably don't even recognize their feelings. They just don't know how to make that first step. And that's where I think the VA can be so helpful, especially with a program like this, where it's going to be very easy to make a connection.

Jack: Get in the mix and do not isolate and pull yourself away from existence. That's not a path to health. And the VA is crucial, crucial, to the recovery of these guys. It's a safety net.

Find the place where you're supposed to be in this mosaic of overall help. You know, serve again. Don't give up.



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