



Oregon Ranch Provides Healing and Hope for Military Veterans

By Alison Perry

In 2003 my brother deployed for the invasion of Iraq as an Apache helicopter pilot. With a heart to serve, he joined the military in the 1990s in hopes of flying humanitarian aid missions to Latin America. A year prior to 9/11 he was reassigned from the Black Hawk helicopter, which flew rescue missions, to the Apache gunship. The motto of his unit was “Death From Above.”

My brother, Todd, returned home from his first deployment and told me and my family that he was planning to go for the medevac assignment or get out of the military. This was my first encounter with what is now referred to as moral injury, and the gravity of how our men and women in uniform are called to serve. Todd got the medevac assignment and the motto for his new unit was “Life From Above.”

A native of Georgia, I moved to Portland, Oregon, in 2000 to pursue a master’s degree in counseling. I started graduate school a month to the day after 9/11. My brother was deployed to Iraq the third year of my program and during this time I discovered a sense of urgency about serving in some capacity myself.

In 2005 I was hired by the Portland VA mental health clinic to

assist with a flood of new intakes. Not only were veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq pouring into the system, but Vietnam veterans were also asking for help for the first time. Thus began a six-year career that turned into a vocation, as well as a passion for working with combat veterans across the lifespan.

Without A Vision The People Perish

In 2007 I transferred from the Portland VA Medical Center to the more rural community-based outpatient clinic in Bend, Oregon. Just prior to transferring, I had a case that changed my understanding of the system I was working in and sparked the vision of something completely different. At 22 years old, my veteran client had been in combat in Iraq, sexually assaulted by his combat buddy after the war, and was struggling with his first symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. He was viewed by the system as a “high needs” or “complex” client. No one wanted to work with him. A social work colleague and I took him under our wing. We got a call one day that he was in the psychiatric lock-down unit, “throwing furniture and threatening staff.” In exasperation I looked at my

colleague and said, “I wish we had a sheep ranch out east where we could send these guys, where they could work on the land, sleep under the stars, and be in a community of other veterans.”

At the VA clinic in Bend I began working with a significantly older population of veterans, including many Vietnam veterans. I was struck as they shared their fears and concerns about death and dying. I couldn’t help but wonder what combat trauma would look like for them at the end of life. I also wondered why God was opening my heart to so many different dimensions – the struggle of the veteran newly home from war, the warrior facing the end of life, and all that lay in between. He had planted the seed of a vision and now he was growing it. It was the vision of different generations of veterans healing together: working the land, growing their own food, and caring for each other.

In 2007 I started going on retreat at Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey in Lafayette, Oregon. I befriended several of the monks, including an 87-year-old WWII veteran, Brother Martin. I was fascinated to learn that it was not uncommon after WWII and Korea for veterans to enter

monastic life. They were seeking solitude, peace, community, purpose, and structure. Brother Martin showed me pictures from community picnics, of veteran monks feeding sheep and working in gardens. Suddenly my vision made perfect sense!

God does not call the equipped, he equips the called

In 2013, I took a leap of faith and left the VA to pursue my call. Passion, perseverance, and many amazing people helped birth a vision into reality. In 2014, Central Oregon Veterans Ranch (COVR) received its nonprofit status. In 2015 we partnered with a private investor to begin operations on a 19-acre working ranch, where the previous owners had been raising a heritage breed of sheep. We started out as an all-volunteer crew, mostly combat veterans, with no farming or ranching experience. Fueled with a passion for our purpose, God equipped us as we went.

Over the course of the past six years, COVR has grown its agriculture and peer support programs, while also renovating a four-bedroom home on site with future plans for specialized end of life care for combat veterans. In partnership with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, we operate a hydroponics lettuce business and offer free education to veterans and the community. We partner with a local nonprofit to administer the USDA's Beginner Farmer Rancher Development program, offering free mentoring and education for veterans in farming and ranching.

We also offer free peer support groups and peer support training, in addition to other special programs throughout the year. The overarching mission is to build community among veterans who are otherwise isolated or feel marginalized in civilian society. COVR has become a hub where veterans feel a sense of belonging and build a network of support that extends beyond their time at the ranch.

During a recent tour with stakeholders, a veteran of Afghanistan was asked if there was any one thing – agriculture, peer support, or just coming out and volunteering every week – that had really made a difference. “It all works together,” he said. Like the veterans who entered monasteries, he had found peace, community, and purpose at the ranch. To quote Catholic farmer and philosophy professor Stephen McGinley, “Things have a nature and exist in a communion of relations that we must attend to, . . . to enable some of those things to realize the telos or ultimate purpose of their nature.” Rather than a prescribed method of “treatment” that can cause veterans to feel like objects to be manipulated,

COVR fosters an organic process of healing and growth that honors the dignity of the person.

A few days ago I checked in with a Marine combat veteran, a regular who volunteers weekly and attends a combat vet peer support group at COVR. “Coming out here has made all the difference, as well as the community building,” he said. “It’s put order back in my life. You’re definitely doing God’s work here, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise!”

For more information about Central Oregon Veteran’s Ranch, contact Alison Perry at alisonp@covranch.org.

