

My husband, Gary, is a retired 100% disabled combat vet with PTSD and the Gulf War Syndrome - much like John Nash, the founder of Combat Veterans Cowboy Up ("CVCU"). In the Army's Combat Engineers, my husband's MOS was sort of like the character's in the movie, the Hurt Locker, except my husband liberated Kuwait. My husband lived to speak, to very few, about clearing mines - clipping bomb wires in the minefields of Saudi Arabia, and building the 2 main supply roads, Cadillac and Dodge. He cleared over 250 miles of minefields the old fashioned way - roads that were built in the Gulf War and used again for Iraqi Freedom.

Much like John Nash, my husband is a retired disabled combat vet except my husband was diagnosed with 100% PTSD and suffers from the Gulf War syndrome. John Nash self-medicated his PTSD with alcohol and credits his horse "Rainy" with saving his life one night when he was going to take himself out. Gary showed his true colors when he attempted suicide, again, this past December. He has always loved guns and cannot be around them. On a cold December night, this past year before the solstice, Gary had a hallucination, reliving combat due to the loneliness of the holidays, the stress of a war time anniversary - he got a hold of one - luckily. . . the gun jammed.

In our country one combat veteran commits suicide every day. People say living with someone who has PTSD is like walking on egg shells. I resent this metaphor. Living with someone who has PTSD is like walking in a minefield. The Gulf War - for that matter, the Vietnam War, the Forgotten War, Iraqi Freedom and the Afgan War, is still raging in our living rooms but largely due to John Nash's CVCU, TODAY my husband is able to experience an inner peace and is well on HIS way on the road to recovery.

My husband has participated in CVCU these past 17 months and in all of my over 20 years experience of him, I have experienced no greater time of peace, healing and recovery than right NOW.

"The soldier, above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war." General Douglas McArthur.

Gary was trained as a soldier. There are 4 kinds of soldiers, those that are married and need a job to support their families, those that want to go to college on the GI Bill, those that just want to be patriots and those that just want to soldier, like their fathers and uncles before them, who fought in WWII and the Korean War. This kind of soldier lives it, sleeps it and eats soldiering all up, hook line and sinker. Gary trained as a soldier like an athlete trains for the game. Gary was an All-City and All State player for the State of Minnesota with a scholarship to Iowa State but he chose to serve his county. When Gary was medically discharged, because all he knew was how TO BE a soldier, he had nothing to do anymore.

After retiring from the military Gary picked up over 13 assault charges including DVs, was looking at 25 years in prison, went through 2 divorces and as a result, lost contact with his children. He became a loner, would never let people BE around him, not let anyone in, frequented bars just looking to start a fight, just for the sake of fighting - looking for anyone or anything to fight about to prove to someone, anyone, that they were wrong about something. After Gary's service, he drifted from job to job - although he had great skill with his hands as a mechanic and a welder - a "jack of all trades" - he struggled in the civilian world. People would try to help him stateside, big companies like the Northern Railroad (even the Denver Police Department) but he could not function in the real world due to his PTSD, with cortisol racing through his veins - his body stuck in its natural cycle of over producing cortisol. Gary is a highly decorated soldier, many bronze and silver stars,

ARCOMS (and even took shrapnel to the forehead). The VA almost gave up on him until John Nash.

I believe my husband's mental health, well-being and recent recovery is a direct result of his participation in John Nash's Combat Veteran's Cowboy Up. Today, Gary is a very enjoyable person to be around and people, especially me, and his children and grandchildren are growing around him. Gary's children, brothers and sister now feel like they are beginning to understand him (and his grandchildren and son have been out to the Ranch). John has always welcomed me to join Gary at Fall Moon Ranch and feed carrots to his horses while the vets are in session. This brings me comfort and peace. This past summer, I just completed the 12 week NAMI ("National Association of Mental Health") Family to Family program at the VA and deepened my compassion for combat vets and their families suffering from the invisible wounds of war.

As a nation we cannot afford to stand idly by and not serve and assist in healing those who have put their lives in harm's way, fighting for our country's freedoms. Our veterans did not ask for the silent scars of war, freedom is not free.

In a recent survey, I was asked the question, if I were given a chance to have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would I choose and what would I speak about and why. My first thought was Winston Churchill who said, "When you are going through Hell, keep going." Because I'm on the other side of my husband's recovery, I'm on the other side of Hell. Its taken over 20 years and its only most recently that Gary has made his greatest strides (in the past 7 months).

John's program stresses transferring the military ("reactive") mind to the thinking ("reflective") mind. From transferring what the armed forces train for survival in combat, i.e., the "military mind" (which becomes an automatic reaction for soldiers to survive in the line of fire or die) to the thinking mind (I'm safe, I'm home, I'm not on the battlefield). Before CVCU my husband didn't know how to change his way of being and further, wasn't willing to change. Gary had gone through many, many programs at various VA hospitals in the Mid-West that he would fail and feel, time and time again, like his life was spinning out of control. Before CVCU, his VA counselor was afraid to let his grandchildren be around him due to his proclivity to anger quickly, to being irritable and violent and for the added stress on him of anyone being around him (in his perimeter). After Gary's recent failed attempt of suicide, he scared himself into changing and John Nash became his keeper and his horses, Gary's mirror. Horses, much like children, naturally do not lie and will even tell on you if you are mistreating them: the horses, they'll show it; the children, they'll tell it. Horses can sense your heart beat 100s of feet away. In order to join up with one, you've got to do a self-check and calm yourself. This technique is practiced and ingrained at CVCU and Gary has been successful in his practice, and making tremendous strides. It took Gary a long time to trust the process. Most veterans at CVCU experience significant transformation after 10 sessions – Gary's wounds are deep and invisible. Today he's done a 180 – a complete turnaround. Believe me, 17 months ago I was highly skeptical of John's assurances that his program could heal Gary. There's truth in John's mission: "We might not be out of the woods but at least we found the trail." Gary has goals now, he says his future is bright and he continues to pray for peace.

Not to say there aren't bumps in the road. The Aurora shooting a year ago last summer shook Gary to the core. His son and son's his fiancé were at the theatre and lost friends in the massacre. At first Gary felt like a victim but now, as a survivor, can comfort and support those in grief. Just this past spring Gary felt the loss of someone close and he says

for the first time, his fear of death didn't paralyze him but instead was able to reach out in comfort and support.

It took Gary's social worker two years to convince him to go to Cowboy Up. I rode with Gary on his first trip out to Fall Moon Ranch in March of 2012. He didn't want to drive down the long driveway and instead parked on the corner of Country Road 25 and highway 86 because of his fear of the "unknown". Jackie Nash always said this was common for first timers to the program. In fact she predicted this is what Gary did the first time we sat at her kitchen table. I nodded in agreement – that's a wife of a combat vet speaking. Jackie was pivotal in Gary's recovery. Some people are city folks, and some just aren't cut out to be cowboys. You don't have to be a cowboy to participate in Cowboy Up. "Its just a program where you can be safe" Gary says. You might never want to buy a pair of cowboy boots or even a cowboy hat . . .

My dream is to have John Nash's CVCU funded to facilitate the expedited healing of returning combat vets. To have CVCU incorporated into the PTSD program at the Denver VA Hospital would be a dream come true. Sure, there are other healing modalities besides the "therapists in the barn" but my experience is that there is no other therapy my husband received in the last 20 years that has been as powerful and immediate as John Nash's Combat Veteran's Cowboy UP!

Godspeed John Nash and Combat Veteran's Cowboy Up.

Teamwritten by Gary and Irene  
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