

How Do We Provide a Path of Renewal and Empowerment for Returning Combat Veterans?

Who's working to answer this question?

The Merritt Center, a non profit organization is dedicated to renewal and empowerment education via classes, workshops and experiential programs. Since its founding in 1987, it has been working with clients seeking ways to move through and past the trauma they have experienced.

Betty Merritt, founder and director, left the business world after a life changing experience that sent her on a journey to make her dream of a retreat center dedicated to renewal and empowerment a reality. She has created an environment for emotional healing by providing a safe space, a process for regaining trust, and therapists to present skills and techniques to heal mind, body and spirit.

The veterans program came from Betty's heart and mind as she observed the needs of the returnees. The free veterans' program was a dream come true when a four-weekend pilot retreat program successfully completed in 2006.

What is the process for returning combat veterans?

The first is to feel part of a "family" in addition to the vet's family of origin. The setting, The Merritt Lodge, is a homey, simple retreat center in a small rural community of Star Valley that allows the freedom of forest exploration, home like setting for meals and small but welcoming accommodations.

Second, once the safety of the setting and inviting homey atmosphere allows the veteran to begin to relax, a talking circle is created. The circle, in a living room space with comfy sofas, chairs and floor seating, begins with the passing of a talking stick. The person with the talking stick may speak from their heart about anything or simply sit in silence and pass the stick to the next person. As hearts open and experiences are shared the level of trust is intensified?

Third, are daily presentations of information about trauma and proven effective skills to deal with trauma. These are practiced with a mentor who has walked the combat path and through the trauma of war. Skills include a trauma release exercise, body work, guided visualizations, drumming, journaling and ceremony. There is a sweat lodge ceremony to purge toxins of mind, body and spirit and there is a closing ceremony with family.

Where does this take place?

The Merritt Lodge is outside of Payson, AZ on 13 acres in a small rural community of Star Valley. There are 15 resident rooms, a large meeting room, several other meeting spaces, many hammocks, swings, forest paths, a garden meditation area and much flora and fauna.

When do these retreats take place?

As soon as at least six participants are identified, the first weekend retreat is scheduled. This initial weekend is followed by three additional weekends (one per month) are free to all participants: Combat veterans, mentor veterans, volunteers, therapists and special skill presenters.

How does this work?

The first step is to identify a returning combat veteran.

If the Minnesota National Guard process is used. The returning vet has several days at home with family and friends and then returns to the base with family and support persons. In that process there are several steps to educate vet and family, as well as the community about the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The vet then proceeds with a program of education and therapy to release the memories of war and to learn and practice the skills of trigger response release.

In our program the vet is self identified and contacts us for a prescreening application and program description. When we receive the application we refer all vets who are seriously mentally/emotionally impaired to a residential program at the VA. For those who are self sustaining and functional we provide four weekends of healing: "releasing the experiences of combat", "learning to release the triggers of trauma", "learning to use skills to reduce nightmares, flashbacks and hostile behavior" and "reprogramming the mind" to expect and trust safety and to then begin to recreate a band of brothers/sisters who will watch their backs in a civilian setting.-Mentors provide the foundation for that band as well as on-going support.

Why do we want to do this?

According to the PTSD study by Arch Intern Medicine: the about 30% of returnees will experience some form of mental dysfunction upon returning to civilian life. Most of those affected are between the ages of 18-24. This population is the foundation of the future of our communities; our country. If we don't find these veterans soon after they return from combat, they turn to substance abuse and develop dysfunctional behaviors at home, work and in the community. If the Vietnam War returning vets taught us anything it was that if we don't welcome these vets and give them a path to adjust and reintegrate with society they will retreat from society and become a drain on society.

We are finding there are still Vietnam Vet who are still experiencing the symptoms of PTSD and are struggling to create a successful life with healthy relationships with friends, family, work and their community. Surely we don't want to repeat the past and lose these valiant warriors to drugs and alcohol.