



Army veteran Mark Duran



Guitars for Vets provides free lessons and a guitar to veterans who've suffered trauma

Program Offers Guitar Lessons, Therapy for Military Veterans

By Erin Toner

July 6, 2011 | WUWM | Milwaukee, WI

Here in Milwaukee and in cities across the country, military veterans are on waiting lists for a type of therapy to treat war-related mental health problems. But they're not waiting to see doctors or counselors at VA hospitals. These vets are lining up to take part in a growing program that uses music instruction and free guitars to soothe symptoms of trauma. WUWM's Erin Toner has more:

Thirty-eight-year-old Army veteran Mark Duran recently wrote his first original song for guitar. He says it's a musical portrait of his Basset Hound lumbering around the backyard. Duran is a graduate of Guitars for Vets, a program that started in Milwaukee in 2007 and now has chapters in more than 20 states. The program that's growing by word-of-mouth offers free lessons and a guitar to military veterans who've suffered trauma. Duran was referred to the program by his VA psychiatrist as an alternative mental health treatment.

"It's nice to have that vibration coming inside of you and realizing it's nice to have it in your arms cause it feels a lot like my M4. It has that same tactile feeling of safety of having your weapon with you," Duran says.

Duran served in Afghanistan with the Army military police. In September 2005, he was in the lead vehicle in a unit on patrol in Helmand Province. Duran says it was routine until the crowds began to scatter. That's when a car drove right up to front of the convoy and blew up.

"That's the last thing I remember. I remember seeing a little kid on a bike nearby and that's the last image of...him disappearing, and me going out. And woke up minutes later, medic was working on me and the first words out of his mouth was 'Mark you're OK, you have your arms and legs, so you'll be fine.' And that was I guess the criteria," Duran says.

Like many veterans, Duran is a lifelong soldier struggling to adjust in a civilian world. He has three problems that have become hallmarks of modern military service – Traumatic Brain Injury, chronic pain and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Duran says he didn't recognize the person he'd become when he first came home from war. He was angry and depressed, and he lashed out at coworkers, his 10-year-old son and his wife.

"And she was so strong, to deal with that and to be with me this whole time. You should interview the wives more so than the soldiers because they can tell you the true story. We're just kind of reacting to life. Cause they know what you were before and what you were after and her main frustration is, why didn't they tell us this?" Duran says.

Tonight, a group of mostly Vietnam veterans have gathered at a residential home on the VA grounds in Milwaukee. They've all been referred to Guitars for Vets by their doctors or social workers. Donna Smaglick says she was sexually assaulted by military personnel in the 1970s. She didn't report it and started drinking to cope with the trauma. Smaglick says learning the guitar has given her some peace.

"It makes me feel better. It really does. Everybody is so good here. They really are. You know I've

been going through depression and physical problems, but I'm fighting it," Smaglick says.

"I think one of the things that really makes this program work is we're not there to evaluate these people. We're simply there to teach them guitar," Nettesheim says.

That's Patrick Nettesheim, a Guitars for Vets co-founder and instructor. He says the veterans benefit from the soothing effects of music and the knowledge that if they want to talk, someone is there to listen.

"They are our brothers and sisters and yeah, they volunteered for their service, they volunteered for their combat, but they didn't volunteer for a life of trauma, and that's where we as a society, I strongly believe, need to step it up and take care of them for as long as their lives are," Nettesheim says.

A research team at the local VA in Milwaukee is studying the effectiveness of guitar lessons as a treatment program. Guitars for Vets – which is totally reliant on donations – is hoping the research will lead to federal funding.

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