

Mil-Tree

Community, military coming together

By Hilary Sloan

Basin Wide Spirit Magazine

One in eight returning Iraq veterans suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, an Army study found. They may have trouble holding jobs or building intimate relationships. Some can't leave their homes because of extreme fears and phobias.

The key to healing, psychotherapist Ed Tick writes in his book, "The War and the Soul," is to understand PTSD as a "soul wound" that affects the whole community.

Twentynine Palms, home to the largest Marine base in the world, is intimately affected by PTSD. The question is, what can we do about it?

Cheryl Montelle, a busy mother, wife, teacher, writer and part-time resident of Joshua Tree read Tick's book and decided to do something.

"At the beginning of Ed's book he talks about a veteran who came in and said, 'My soul has left my body



HILARY SLOANE For Basin Wide Spirit

Cheryl Montelle works at a Mil-Tree fundraiser.

and I know where it is, it's sitting next to me.' That just breaks my heart," Montelle said during a recent interview in a Joshua Tree pizzeria. "Ed said there was a lot the community could do.... I thought OK, I am part of the community, let me reach out to others."

There is both determination and self-questioning in Montelle's voice. It's been a long day, driving the 2½ hours from Los Angeles to Joshua Tree and spending all afternoon and evening in meetings, yet she is still focused and energetic.

Montelle was so moved by "The War and the Soul" that she immediately called Tick and invited him to Joshua Tree. Tick agreed to come and held a book reading and community

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meeting at the Red Arrow April 8 and 9, 2012. Dale Fredenburg, a Vietnam veteran, was touched deeply. He has since participated in Soldier's Heart retreats, offered by Tick and his wife, therapist Kate Dhalstedt, to returning veterans. Fredenburg also became a Mil-Tree board member.

"Ed discovered through his experience with vets ... that throughout history, cul-



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People share food at a listening circle sponsored by Mil-Tree at the Art Queen in Joshua Tree.

tures like the American Indians had warriors. They prepared their warriors to protect and defend, taking them through rituals and ceremonies, like graduations. That is exactly what we do. We go to basic training, you graduate. You go through advanced training and you are flown into the theater. ... You have your first combat experience, it's another ritual and ceremony that moves you to a different level of warrior. There is one more level that fox hole soldiers, many, but not all, experience. It's what I call berserk. Once you have been in the chaos of combat, you are so crazy, you have no fear of death. You have been changed. You now have to find some way to march back to rejoin the tribe and fit in."

Mil-Tree, under the nonprofit Western Gates, Roots, and Wings Foundation, is a grassroots organization that offers healing through events like retreats, listening circles and art-related workshops.

This has been a deeply personal project for Montelle. "What I see (for Mil-Tree)," she said, "is an interaction between the veterans and the general community through art and communication. Mil-Tree is creating safe places for healing to occur."

Montelle has gathered a board with Fredenburg, who is a retired marriage and family therapist; Jodi Callahan, a retired Marine; Paula Jeane, a lifelong educator teaching psychology at Copper Mountain College and yoga in Joshua Tree; Louise Mathias, a writer, consultant and vice president of Federal Grant Development and Training, a Washington-based consulting firm; and Laura Ranadell, a licensed clinical social worker who recently opened her private practice in Yucca Valley.

Since its inception, Mil-tree has organized monthly meetings and weekly writing workshops, hosted an open mic night for military personnel and veterans at Pappy and Harriet's, sponsored a lecture by veteran Paul Henderson on the role of the warrior and organized a talking and listening circle at the Art Queen. On this year's Memorial Day weekend, artist Bobby Furst hosted a fundraiser for an upcoming Soldier's Heart retreat. Montelle has brought veteran-actor Brian Deleto to the Basin to perform an excerpt from his one-man show writer Paula Caplan to read from her book, "When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home."

The next big event is a co-sponsored four day Soldier's Heart retreat Sept. 10-13 at the Joshua Tree Retreat Center.

For information, go to Mil-Tree.org.