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Returning Home retreat aids veterans with PTSD

By Fran Gonzalez | Oct 24, 2019



Retreat Director Alexandra Whitney tends the fire at the Returning Home retreat at Point Lookout, while support staff look on. The retreat took place Oct. 10-15 to help veterans with PTSD.

Courtesy of: Alexandra Whitney

NORTHPORT — A healing retreat to help veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder wrapped up Oct. 15 with several miracles unfolding.

Returning Home is a retreat, therapy, education and research program where attendees develop skills to re-enter civilian life while managing physical discomfort.

Over the course of six days at Point Lookout, 21 veterans — five women and 16 men — took part in equine therapy and forest bathing (walking therapy), in addition to therapeutic services based on the Somatic Experiencing model developed by Dr. Peter A. Levine.

An eight-week online support group will be offered post-retreat to further assist each veteran with practicing and integrating tools and techniques learned during the retreat.

Levine has worked in the field of stress and trauma for over 40 years and has written several books on the subject. Trauma he said, is something that happens to the body, where a person can become “stuck” in fight, flight or freeze responses, “actively defending or also, collapsing into helplessness.”

"The brain sends messages to the body and muscles also send messages back to the brain, which amplifies it," Levine told *The Journal* during an interview following the retreat session Oct. 14. "The basic premise (of Somatic Experiencing) is to help people develop new sensations and feelings in their bodies, ones that contradict the pervasive threat and overwhelming helplessness."

The military trains soldiers to be hyper-alert or hyper-vigilant, Levine said, for basic survival, but because of trauma, they can become fixated and "can't come down off of it," unable to relate to their families and non-military friends.

"It's about deconstructing their conditioning," he said. "Part of the program is to help these men and women return their nerves back to a sense of safety."

Retreat Director Alexandra Whitney, who grew up in Newcastle, took training courses from Levine, though never met him until a year ago in October. "He put his dream with my dream and we made it happen," she told *The Journal*.

Whitney's vision was to create a residential trauma program in Maine with specialized events for veterans.

"We threaded the principles of SE into the different therapeutic disciplines such as yoga, equine-assisted movement, individual SEs session and walking meditation based on the Japanese therapeutic art of Shinrin-yoku," she said.

According to Whitney, this type of meditation decreases blood pressure, increases immune system functions and lowers stress hormones.

"It relates to SE because what we are doing is awakening the sense perceptions, and slowing way down," she said. "You engage your sense perceptions (sight, hearing, smell and touch) and track what that experience is as you are doing it."

There is an educational piece of the program, she said, which teaches what trauma is, about the nervous system and how to deal with anger. There is also a big social component at the retreat. Veterans and staff ate and engaged together, "human to human," Whitney said. Every night there was a fire circle with storytelling, and with veterans supporting each other.

The retreat started before they came to Point Lookout, she said. Attendees were asked to send in their biographies and photographs so the staff could recognize them as they arrived.

"So from the moment they came in the door, we were already on a first-name basis," she said. "We had facial recognition and had a sense of who they were coming in."

Recalling memorable moments, Levine said during group discussions, one young vet raised his hand to say he had no feeling at all except pain, and that was at a level of seven.

"We worked with the pain, and his whole relationship with pain changed," he said. "But along with the pain resolving, he had many tears and I let the tears speak. Everyone was really touched. They knew him as someone who didn't have any feelings. He had said he was not able to cry."

Afterward, Levine said, the vet said he felt good — he felt happiness. "It was beautiful," Levine said.

Another miracle moment, Levine said, came when a Vietnam vet with a service dog confided in the group he had been sleeping on a cot at his parents' house.

One veteran in the group invited him to come live for free at his house, where he would have his own apartment. Levine said he even offered to help the Vietnam vet apply for VA benefits for which he was eligible. He had never claimed a disability because he did not want anyone to know he was disabled.

Michele Solloway, a member of the board of Human Enrichment and SE Research Coalition, told the story of an older veteran who initially expressed feeling isolated from the group. "Today that feeling has totally gone away and he has bonded with the group," Solloway said. "Though he is older, they have still have all these things in common."

His entire physiognomy changed, Solloway said. "The way they hold themselves, their faces, they are laughing — it's a remarkable transformation over a short period of time."

Whitney said a tapestry of people wanting to support veterans stepped forward to make the program possible when obstacles were placed in their path. A week prior to the start of the retreat, Whitney discovered the original location, Camp Fair Haven in Brooks, had not completed needed repairs and would not be available to host the retreat. Whitney said she was in total distress.

She decided to look for wedding venues, when she hit upon Point Lookout and left an "S.O.S. message." Catering Director Gerry Hill heard the call and "made it happen in a very generous way," she said.

Hill's manager is a vet, and he also works with a man named Kelly Thorndike, who was severely injured in the 2005 Abu Ghraib prison battle in Iraq. At one point, both Hill and Thorndike ran an omelet station for the vets at the retreat.

Levine also recalls traveling back from the equine part of the program, which was held at Moose Ridge Farm in Lincolnville, and stopping at a shop selling baskets and moccasins.

There he began a conversation with a man who he later learned was a Penobscot Tribal Elder and also a paratrooper in WWII.

"He gave us beautiful roses that are made from tree shavings with natural dyes," Levine said. The roses were presented to the vets as a memento of the Returning Home experience.

A few others graciously provided support to make the retreat possible, Whitney said. Clark's Cove Farm & Inn in Bristol donated apples, Belfast Rotary Club raised \$500 for the event, and Searsmont resident Mickey Sirota lent a hand with fundraising efforts.

Solloway said the research they collect will help streamline the project for future retreats as well as provide data to obtain grants.

"The more results of effectiveness you can make," she said, "the better your chances. It's a trajectory you want to have."

For additional information on the program and daily activities at the Returning Home retreat, contact Dr. Alexandra Whitney at info@returning-home.com or by phone or text to 303-588-4939.



The staff at the Returning Home retreat pictured here at Point Lookout. Front row, left: Scott Steiner, Peter Levine, Laura Rigalbuto, Alexandra Whitney, Dave Berger, Danielle Murphy, Susana Kugeares, Shanly Weber, Donna Hilbig, Talya Dash. Second row, from left: Clint Withrow, Carlos Canales, Katherine Satterfield, Michelle Solloway, Mark Olson, Heather Steele, Patricia Belleno, Leah Gaston, Henry Pittman, Gustav Elmberger and Melissa Stager. (Courtesy of: Alexandra Whitney)



Dr. Peter A. Levine, developer of Somatic Experiencing, is shown at Moose Ridge Farm in Lincolnton. Veterans took part in equine-assisted movement therapy at the Returning Home retreat Oct. 10-15. (Courtesy of: Alexandra Whitney)



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