

United States Military Veterans: How We Can Help Those who Need it Most

Published 09/07/2010 - 10:02 p.m. PST

By Ben Gales

I have lived in Century City for over a decade and practice law on the Westside.

I have always believed that those who risk their lives through military service are among our nation's greatest heroes. I also believe that many of us would like to find a way to help our veterans, but don't really know what to do. About three years ago a friend of mine showed me how to help by introducing me to an organization called New Directions.

Located on the Campus of the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration off of Wilshire Blvd., New Directions is an agency that provides housing and treatment services to over 225 veterans at any given time. The clients of New Directions are generally at risk of homelessness and face mental health and/or substance abuse problems. Founded in 1992,

New Directions has helped thousands of veterans and also serves as a local, state, and national leader in advocating for veterans.

Meet former United States Marine George Hill. After leaving the Marine Corps in 1985, George struggled with mental health issues as a result of his military service. Since George could not function effectively in mainstream society, he turned to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. What ensued shortly thereafter was twelve years of homelessness on the streets of Los Angeles. In 1998, George found New Directions, which, in his own words, literally "saved his life." George has now been stable and free from drugs and alcohol for over a decade.

This may be hard to believe, but in the last year George has hit the national television spotlight as the leader of the New Directions Choir, which appeared on NBC's popular show "America's Got Talent." Despite consisting entirely of formerly homeless veterans, the Choir was described by the show's Judges as one of the greatest acts they have ever seen. Indeed, the Choir is nothing short of a remarkable testament to the resiliency and character of our nation's military veterans.

What is amazing about George is that he cares very little about the attention he has received from being on national television. Rather, George cares about using his singing to help veterans by encouraging others to seek out help if they need it. And while George has certainly become one of the more famous graduates of New Directions, he is actually just one of hundreds of veterans who have literally turned their lives around by connecting with New Directions for help.

Before I decided to become involved in helping veterans, I held the mistaken belief that our government was taking care of their basic needs. For example, I assumed that there would at least be government housing where homeless veterans could turn. I was wrong. I soon learned that community based non profit organizations like New Directions were providing housing and other services because the government was not meeting this need.

The problem of veteran homelessness in Los Angeles is daunting. Many people estimate that there are over 10,000 homeless veterans in Los Angeles County. This staggering number is in large part due to our government's failure to care for veterans returning from Vietnam. As of now, many of the approximately 2 million veterans deployed to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan are returning home and many of them are suffering from the vicious bite of combat related post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and other severe physical and mental health problems. The time is now to help these young returning soldiers in order to avoid another era marked by a pandemic of veteran homelessness. It is clear that the government will not be able to solve and prevent veteran homelessness alone, which is why New Directions is needed in Los Angeles.

I was deeply impressed to learn that New Directions not only provides housing for veterans, but does a whole lot more. Once a veteran enters New Directions, he or she receives a wide array of services to address mental health and/or substance abuse problems. New Directions has multiple teams of case managers and mental health clinicians that work directly with every veteran at New Directions on a daily basis. Moreover, New Directions offers job placement assistance, education, legal services, a money management program, and a range of other services that all amount to a holistic and effective system of care.

In addition to providing exceptional services, New Directions has created a culture of discipline and success that works. Every veteran at New Directions wakes up by 6:00 a.m. and spends their day focused on self-improvement. Watching television is a rare event. The New Directions culture is also one of veterans helping other veterans. Many New Directions employees are veterans themselves and work at the agency because they believe in its mission.

New Directions also helps veterans through functioning as a leadership agency. New Directions works on local, state and national policy issues, and develops programs that serve as models for the rest of the country. For example, New Directions has developed innovative programs to meet the unique needs of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, as well as female veterans. New Directions' work has been recognized by some of the senior most leaders of our federal government, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, who recently visited New Directions. CNN also recently featured New Directions for its work helping veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

In George's words: "There really was no other place besides New Directions that could give me the type of help I needed to get off the streets and turn my life around. I want other former warriors to know that even though they are tough, it is okay to receive help." On November 7, 2010, New Directions will host an annual dinner at the Beverly Hilton in support of the agency. New Directions cannot do its vitally needed work without financial support from the local community. George will be honored by New Directions at the Dinner and will be singing, along with the rest of the New Directions Choir, as part of the evening's entertainment.

If you are interested in attending the dinner or would like to learn more about New Directions, feel free to contact me or visit www.ndvets.org. I may be reached at 310-914-4045 x154, or at bgales1@gmail.com. If you are interested in seeing the Choir's television performance on America's Got Talent, visit www.youtube.com and enter "America's Got Talent New Directions Choir."