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## WOUNDED HEALERS

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Veterans offer a pioneering approach to caring for fellow veterans

Upon returning home from combat, some veterans discover that their battles are not yet over. Reintegrating into the world they once left, they may find unexpected roadblocks. Securing employment, affording homes and re-establishing relationships can be difficult. They may be troubled by psychological issues or trauma. For some, even their spiritual lives seem empty and they may feel disconnected from God.

For Fred and Jo Ann Hudson, navy veterans from

Albuquerque, New Mexico, these issues are important. Fred's own return to the United States after serving "three years, three months and three days," including one tour in Vietnam, was not easy. Having served in an unpopular war, he did not receive a hero's welcome. His superior advised him "not to wear his military uniform, only civilian clothes" when he returned home, and it took him time to gain his bearings again.

Understanding the realities that veterans face upon their return, Fred and Jo Ann decided to take action. A

Elinor Reiners of the Veterans Integration Center accepts clothing donations for the hundreds of veterans that her organization serves each year.

dynamic duo that married in 1967 after a two-month courtship, they soon realized their calling: to help veterans heal. As Catholics, they especially wanted to help veterans rebuild their spiritual lives.

With military fervor, the Hudsons designed a multi-pronged approach to address the range of problems that veterans face. In the last few years, they've amassed an arsenal of assistance programs for veterans, including three that are outlined here: Catholic War Veterans, Veterans Task Force and Partners in Care.

*In 2004, they established a Catholic War Veterans (CWV) post at their parish, Prince of Peace. CWV is a national organization, founded in 1935, to support active duty personnel, military chaplains and veterans. Its work is shaped by the motto – “For God, For Country, For Home.”*

As part of the CWV, Fred and Jo Ann greet veterans at the airport when they arrive back home. They set up booths at the New Mexico State Fair to pass out



Fred and Jo Ann Hudson are bringing dignity to veterans.

*As Catholics, they are particularly interested in helping veterans regain a spiritual life.*

information to veterans and families, including copies of “Prayers for Our Troops in Time of War.” At their parish, they collect food and clothing for the New Mexico Veterans Integration Center, an organization that provides housing, employment training and support services to veterans who appear at its door without jobs, homes or resources. They also send care packages with items donated from the parish, including homemade rosaries, to troops overseas.

The Hudsons started the local CWV post with two members of Prince of Peace Church who are wartime veterans: Father Michael Shea, the pastor and Deacon Enrique Padilla – both with powerful wartime stories to tell.

Father Shea is retired from active duty but has been deployed several times as a military chaplain. With a shortage of Catholic chaplains, he often was called to give pastoral care to troops overseas. “Sometimes the military needs priests more than fighter pilots,” he said. Father Shea became a military chaplain because he is drawn to troubled spots and to those in need. “Once you’re a Jesus person,” he added, “you go to who is hurt or suffering.”

Deacon Padilla was a marine in the Vietnam War and during his time of duty, two major events shaped the course of his life. The first was a moment of divine intervention that happened one day in the woods of Vietnam. While walking in the deep jungle, he discovered a five-foot tall statue of Our Lady of La Vang, a well-known figure in Vietnam of Our Mother. Despite being surrounded by a bombed-out Catholic church, Our Lady of La Vang was completely intact. Deacon Padilla took the statue, clutching her in his arms, and continued on his way until he suddenly fell into a hidden trap full of sharp bamboo spears that were intended to mortally injure a victim. The statue of Our Lady of La Vang, held tightly in Deacon Padilla’s grip, took the brunt of the fall and shattered into a thousand pieces. Deacon Padilla was only slightly injured. She had saved his life. At that instant, Deacon Padilla made a pact with Our Lady of La Vang – if she brought him home safely, he would serve her for the rest of his life.

Padilla’s request to “bring him home safely” was put to the test a short time later when a second



*“We need to celebrate the soldier.”*

life-changing event occurred – his platoon was fatally attacked. He was the sole survivor of his unit, but just barely: after being hit by 10 bullets, “plus some shrapnel,” his mangled body lay buried in a pile of manure for several hours. Eventually, comrades found him and presumed he was dead. Surprising everyone, Deacon Padilla lived, but was critically injured. After 157 surgeries and more than five years in a hospital, he is confined to a wheelchair. He also has diabetes and a brain tumor, “perhaps because of Agent Orange,” he noted. The fact that he is alive is remarkable. “I am a walking miracle,” he said, then paused, and with a sly smile added, “...rather, a *rolling* miracle.”

Returning to the United States, Padilla encountered the same unfriendly reception that Fred did. As he came back home in traction with a system of pulleys, one war protester actually pushed his pulley weights off his

families to discuss their spiritual needs, identify benefits available and promote healing. The group meets monthly and offers a place of listening and prayer.

Deacon Robert Vigil, Director of Pastoral Outreach for the Archdiocese, belongs to the Veterans Task Force. He said that veterans are often stuck economically and spiritually. “They’ve seen bad things that have made them question their faith,” he said. “We are the *light* for them. The light of Christ dims at war when one is just trying to stay alive.”

The Veterans Task Force finds that many of the burdens that service members carry during combat may stay buried for years. They may feel guilt or anger towards God. They have a hard time talking about their war experiences, and many don’t look for help. This isolation is particularly hard for their families who shared the stress of war while loved ones were deployed, then were overjoyed to have them back home, only to be baffled by the silence of their returning soldiers. This silence is particularly true for younger veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, the longest war in U.S. history.

*A third piece of Fred and Jo Ann’s operational strategy is to help coordinate the recent Partners in Care (PIC) agreement between the New Mexico National Guard, the Archdiocese of Santa Fe and New Mexico Department of Veterans’ Service. The PIC program, started in October 2013, provides faith-based support and services to veterans, military members and their families free of charge. This PIC program is the first one ever to be coordinated with an entire Archdiocese.*

**Archbishop Sheehan of Santa Fe called the PIC program the Hudsons most “ground-breaking ministry and nominated them for Catholic Extension’s 2014 Lumen Christi Award. They were recently named finalists.**

Fred and Jo Ann are leaders on this important issue of veteran rehabilitation. In their grassroots style, they are ramping up the Church’s efforts to make sure we don’t miss people who are hurting or struggling. In the arid desert of New Mexico, they are cultivating a ministry of hope. They are healers, making sure that those who have so bravely given, in turn, receive. ●



The Hudsons, together with Father Shea and Deacon Padilla, founded the local post of the Catholic War Veterans.

stretcher to the ground, causing him immense pain. But rather than be bitter, Deacon Padilla became committed to helping other veterans. In addition to being a deacon, he is a spiritual director for veterans. “We need to celebrate the soldier,” he said.

*A second project that the Hudsons co-coordinate is the Veterans Task Force of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. Working with parishes, this group gathers veterans and*