

Guitars for Veterans Prove Therapeutic

An organization of volunteer guitar instructors gives free lessons to vets struggling with PTSD or who are disabled in some way

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On the second floor of the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans Hospital in Columbia, Mo., music is being made weekly.

With the sound of a metronome clicking in the background, three veterans slowly strum their guitars while their instructor patiently calls out instructions.



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Iraq vet Chris Longdon plays alongside Vietnam veteran Kelly Johnson at the Guitars for Vets Columbia, Mo., chapter.

“Let’s move up to the fifth position,” Tom Williams says. “Watch your right hand. Everybody together, one more time, same string.”

The group gathers at the hospital for a weekly guitar class offered by Guitars for Vets, a national organization offering free guitar instruction to disabled vets. The classes are 10 weeks long and at the end of each, participants are given a free guitar.

Started in Milwaukee in 2007 by guitarist Patrick Nettesheim and Vietnam veteran Dan Van Buskirk, Guitars for Vets has more than 60 chapters in 30 states.

Some 2,500 vets have graduated, which means 2,500 acoustic guitars and accompanying accessories have been donated.

Teaching since he was 16, Nettesheim met Van Buskirk while teaching him. Suffering from PTSD from his time with the 1st Marine Reconnaissance Battalion in Vietnam, Van Buskirk feared he wouldn’t be able to finish.

“His Marine spirit was enough to get him to keep trying,” Nettesheim said. “Dan began experiencing relief from his PTSD symptoms. He could self-soothe with his guitar.”

The pair took their music to the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee. A friend from Cream City Music in Milwaukee donated two guitars to give away to patients.

“They were elated by the guitars,” Nettesheim said. “It became evident rather quickly that we needed to teach them how to play. And that’s how Guitars for Vets was born.”

Lessons are given primarily at VA hospitals or community-based outpatient clinics. Instructors like Williams volunteer to teach the classes.

“Group sessions, even if everyone sounds awful, it’s still great because everyone is laughing,” Nettesheim said. “It helps open windows of serenity.”

‘A Better Place’

After Chris Longdon was diagnosed with PTSD in 2011, he found such serenity in his guitar.

“I found that playing the guitar took me to a better place,” said Longdon, who served with the Marines’ 1st Medical Battalion in Iraq for seven months in 2008. “I tried to deal with all of this on my own, but that didn’t work out so well.”

Longdon taught himself the basics of guitar playing, but once he was in the military, he never played. When he was discharged and struggling, he would drink and play his guitar. Eventually he slowed down on the drinking and replaced it with guitar playing.

“I realized I could play a lot better when I wasn’t drinking,” he joked.

He heard about Guitars for Vets and knew he wanted to get involved. There was no chapter in the state of Missouri, which is where Longdon lives.

“I got one started at the VA in Columbia,” he said. “It was the fastest chapter to get up and running, according to the founders.”

Longdon said he didn’t know how to play well enough to teach the class. But as a peer specialist at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans Hospital, he spread the word that a guitar teacher was needed.

Guitar instructor Tom Williams came on board. He has been playing since he was 14, when he was a pit orchestra guitarist with the University of Missouri Summer Repertory Theater. He has taught music at both the University of Missouri and Central Methodist University. He also is a guitar professor at the Columbia Academy of Music.

“I’m just so glad to be a part of this,” said Williams, who has several friends who are

veterans.

Longdon said there has been a great interest in the weekly class. So much so that he has a waiting list of vets.

“I think the social aspect is the best,” Longdon said. “There are a lot of folks who always wanted to play but never got around to learning.”

Alice MacNaughton is one such vet who always longed to learn.

Having served in the Army and later Air Force from 1975-1997, MacNaughton learned of the class while being treated at the Columbia VA.

“I really feel like that learning to play helps re-train my brain,” said MacNaughton, who suffered a brain injury while in the military.

MacNaughton is the first woman to complete the Guitars for Vets class in Columbia, a fact that clearly delights her when she says it.

She said most therapeutic programs offered to vets are geared more for men so she was happy to hear about Guitars for Vets.

“It’s such a good program,” she said. “Music is a good thing for my therapy.”

‘Music and Art are Cool’

Kelly Johnson served in the Navy from 1969-1974. During the Vietnam War, he was on a swift boat doing river patrols. He was wounded and spent a month at Bethesda Naval Hospital where he participated in a little art therapy. That was the extent of his artistic endeavors until Guitars for Vets entered his life.

He said that various issues led him to the Truman VA hospital in Columbia five years ago. His psychologist there suggested he look into the guitar program.

“It’s been a big help to me,” said Johnson, who bought his first guitar at age 16. “I was getting too isolated and didn’t want to do anything anymore.”

He said he has found that getting involved with as much as he can has allowed him to develop new friendships.

“Being involved gets me out the front door,” Johnson said. “By learning to play the guitar again, it has given me something to do at home to fill that lonely void. Music and art are cool things that help.”

At the VA, Johnson also has received training with pottery, sculpting and drawing. He said he was surprised to learn he isn’t “too bad” with watercolor painting.

While Nettesheim said he is excited about the growth of Guitars for Vets, he does have one problem.

“The hardest part of the job is having to turn people away,” he said.

Without the guitars and accessories and even enough instructors, there can’t be classes. Nettesheim said he has personally taught 150-200 veterans through the program, and Van Buskirk instructs, as well.

“I always knew I wanted to be a musician or a doctor,” said Nettesheim, laughing. “I chose the path of a pauper and became a musician. But with Guitars for Vets, I’m working in the hospital setting.”

For more information on Guitars for Vets, including how to form a chapter, visit www.guitars4vets.org.

This article is featured in the March 2017 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), associate editor, VFW magazine. Photo by Lauren Goldman.