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A Growing Crisis
Women Veterans Left Behind

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Homeless.

The word was one that caught in Melissa’s* throat and over and over in her mind when, during the long nights spent tossing and turning in her aging four-door sedan, she would wake and ponder her story. How had she come to be parked in an airport cell phone lot for sleeping, using the gym for showering and stopping at convenience stores to microwave her scant meals?

Having served her country as an Air Force staff sergeant, with tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, the young mother had come home and found she didn’t fit in. Her military training, which served her well during active duty, didn’t prepare her for living in the world she would return to and the combat and sexual assault trauma that would hauntingly follow her there.

Hesitant to turn to the same system that served as the backdrop for her trauma, Melissa did not seek help at the Veteran’s Administration, though the VA readily recognizes that women veterans are among the fastest growing population of homeless vets and are certainly committing suicide at alarming-rise rates.

At home, her family members found it difficult to cope with the 34-year-old’s erratic behavior and were at a loss as to where to turn to so they could find her and her struggling-to-understand-it-all son appropriate comfort, support and care.

Finally, unable to hold it together long enough to be employable or to even offer her five-year-old son the love and stability he deserved, Melissa turned away from family, friends and all things familiar in a downward spiral of self-medication, despair and day-to-day subsistence. She wasn’t even sure how many more days she had it in her to hold on.

Tireless.

This word best describes Mitchell Coulton’s dedication to helping women veterans like Melissa with programs designed to break the cycle of homelessness and hopelessness and replace it with safety, stability and independent, productive living.

When close to a decade ago, Coulton first looked at the grim statistics regarding women veterans and suicide — and subsequently found no programs anywhere in the United States focused specifically on that demographic — he knew something had to be done. Serving at that time as director of the North Florida Evaluation and Treatment Center (NFETC) in Gainesville, Coulton noticed a significant number of veterans coming through the programs there and wondered why they were not seeking help at the VA.

“Though we’ve already received national attention, many local people don’t know about this issue or about our program.”
“As I looked into it, I was shocked,” said Coulton from his current office in the Marion County Veteran’s Resource Center. “I found out that 600 veterans (many of whom are senior citizens) commit suicide each month in the United States. Each month! I also discovered that 70 percent of these 600 veterans had never gone to the government or VA before choosing this tragic course. And while I then found hundreds of programs across the country designed to help our male veterans in crisis, I could not find a single one for our female vets. I decided something had to be done about that.”

Coulton then finished up his contracts at NFETC and began the detailed planning for what would eventually become Women Veterans in Crisis (WVIC) Whispering Oaks Ranch pilot program in Marion County. Based in Ocala, but offering help for women veterans nationwide, WVIC is designed to soon provide a community-based safety net of crisis intervention, comprehensive mental health care, and wrap-around social services for not only those women who have served in the military, but their children as well.

With all the shovel-ready plans in place for a 350-acre therapeutic campus featuring an equine (rather than institutional) setting, Coulton and his staff are hoping to soon present WVIC Whispering Oaks Ranch to Congress for bi-partisan funding. The transitional program, where up to
250 clients and 35 children progress from a main treatment and residential building to more independent cabin homes while participating in rural livestock and farming activities as well as outbound training, comes with a price tag much too large for local or state budgets to cover. But while the program will require federal funding, it remains an IRS 501(c)(3) Public Charity Organization and needs ongoing public, as much as government, support.

“Though we’ve already received national attention,” Coulton said, “many local people don’t know about this issue or about our program. We have made a presentation to the Marion County commission and to have local support and local public-

Priceless.

With research, a dollar amount can be placed on what a service will cost. Finding the perfect individual or group of individuals to administer that service, however, is priceless. As the budgets, organizational charts, cultural cornerstones, site plans, statistics and program details were all being crafted and honed, Coulton found that just the right people, with just the right backgrounds, began to not only cross his path, but come alongside, as team members at WVIC.
“Over the last five years, policies and procedures were brought in line and all the while I hoped that the right people would come to me somehow — and they have,” Coulton said. Delores Galloway is an example of this very thing happening. One day, she just walked right into my office.”

According to Galloway, who now will serve as Program Manager of Whispering Oaks Ranch Veterans Village Transitional Services, a series of coincidental encounters led her to the Marion County Veteran Resource Center and Coulton’s door.

“Feeling passionate about not only showcasing women’s contributions to the military but also reaching out to the female veteran population and helping each of them to become their best self in civilian life, I approached Mitch with my thoughts and experience,” said Galloway in a recent sit-down interview at Coulton’s WVIC office. “He shared his vision and invited me to come on board.”

Galloway, who kept a detailed diary during her 15 years of military service as one of the final members of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) and in both Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, has filled military instructor and leadership roles she feels uniquely qualify her to help WVIC in a meaningful way.

“What I bring to the table is my experience,” Galloway said. “These women can tell if someone is speaking from the textbook or from the heart. I have inside experience similar to all the other women vets and can help them in their lives. This is just a change of venue. None of the rest is new for me.”

With 17 years of priceless Air Force nursing experience, Retired Major Michelle Langdon will also be on board as WVIC’s Director of Nursing and Emergency Response. Other key positions are similarly filled with openings only currently existing for a director of privacy and director of donor relations.

**Limitless.**

Imagine Melissa driving that same battered sedan through the rolling hills of Marion County and along an oak-canopied driveway toward a place she knew would offer both her and her son hope and healing and limitless possibilities for a better future together. Picture the two of them not separated in stark institutional housing, but nestled safely in a rustic cabin, participating in reparative equine therapy and stress-reducing organic gardening. Envision mother and son working, playing, riding, bonding, healing — leaving homelessness and suicidal thoughts far behind them.

This is what first-of-its-kind WVIC Whispering Oaks Ranch will offer our country’s most at-risk forgotten citizens — women veterans.

The VA says that women comprise the fastest growing seg-
ment of the homeless veteran population, according to military.com. There is no foreseeable limit to the services these brave women will need as more and more female recruits enter military service each day. Nor will there be a limit to the opportunities for caring citizens to offer support to these women and through volunteer service, voices of support, and monetary contributions to help bring to fruition projects like WVIC Whispering Oaks Ranch pilot program.

**Selfless.**

As Coulton and his team prepare to request government funding, they are hopeful that once light is shed on this critical need, letters will be written to senators and representatives and change will take place the way it happens best — through grassroots support of a home-grown effort to make things better than they currently, critically are.

Melissa’s story, though a fictional compilation of real-life experiences gathered from women veterans nationwide, is a reality that will not go away on its own — and will, in fact, be an ongoing problem in need of limitless solutions as more and more selfless women and mothers serve in the United States armed forces.

WVIC’s motto reads: A homeless lifestyle of hunger, desperation and suicide for our veterans is simply not acceptable.

**Individuals who feel the same way can:** Call and write to local representatives and state senators to encourage support of WVIC. Contact WVIC at communityoutreach@wvicrisis.org or 352-433-2320.

**Support WVIC with a donation at** [www.WVICrisis.org](http://www.WVICrisis.org).

**And if you or someone you know is at immediate risk for suicide,** contact the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 (Press 1); text to 838255; or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.