

Kentucky Living

CELEBRATING THE ENERGY
OF YOUR COMMUNITY

healing paths for **VETERANS**

TAKING FLIGHT

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JOIN SANTA

Ride The Polar Express

NATURE



nurtures

Kentucky veterans
turn to the outdoors
to improve mental
health for themselves
and others

BY GRAHAM SHELBY



Nearly 50 years have passed since Gerry Barker last set foot on a battlefield. But even now, on his farm in Metcalfe County, the sights, sounds and overwhelming feelings of combat return all too easily.

“I’ll hear an explosion,” he says, something loud, that shakes his whole body, “and nobody else has heard it.” Or he might be driving along the Cumberland Parkway and see 122 mm rockets shooting toward him, the same kind he saw in Southeast Asia when he was a scout with U.S. Army Special Forces.

“My heart stops,” he says. “All of these are over in a second. I take stock and realize what happened, and go on.”

And go on he has, enduring symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while completing a 22-year Army career, earning a master’s degree, teaching history, working as an administrator, publishing dozens of articles and writing four books.

All the while, Barker has grappled with hallucinations, nightmares, depression, anxiety and guilt.

“I just overloaded on war,” says Barker, a consumer-member of Farmers RECC.

For all the efforts as a society to honor veterans, the truth is that those of us who’ve never gone into battle for our country have little understanding of the toll it takes on those who have, a toll evidenced by the alarming rate at which American veterans take their own lives.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans (a term that includes active-duty service members) make up only 8 percent of the U.S. adult population, but they account for 14 percent of the suicides. On average, 20 veterans die by suicide every day.

The problem is particularly acute in Kentucky, where the VA finds the state’s suicide rate among veterans is 34 percent higher than the national average.

The VA has launched a national campaign (#BeThere) to raise awareness and provides a crisis line for veterans and their loved ones—(800) 273-8255, press 1 or text 838255. The agency provides counseling at its medical centers in Louisville and Lexington and at some of its clinics and other facilities in more than 20 communities around the state.

The VA also is rolling out video telehealth programs. The Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs provides social workers to serve veterans’ mental health needs at its four nursing homes. It also works with organizations like the Disabled American Veterans, American Legion and Veterans of Foreign



■ Gerry Barker, who lives on a farm in Metcalfe County, completed a 22-year Army career, a master’s degree, taught history and wrote four books.

■ Previous page: Following a career in the U.S. Army Special Forces, Barker endures symptoms of PTSD, but finds peace on his farm and with his animals. He currently has 21 goats. Photos: Joe Imel

Wars, and to help veterans receive all their entitled benefits from the VA.

And yet, our veterans’ needs remain greater than all of those efforts put together. At *Kentucky Living*, we wanted to get a sense of how veterans across the state are dealing with the suicide crisis. We found that in addition to traditional treatments like psychotherapy and pharmaceuticals, many Kentucky veterans are taking it upon themselves to find their own paths to healing, both for themselves and their fellow veterans. In many cases, those paths are leading them to



start their own organizations and to get out of doors and into nature.

Mindful adventures

Cassie Boblitt earned a scholarship to Purdue University out of high school, but instead left her hometown of Lebanon Junction to join the Army in 2000. “I wanted adventure,” she says. “I wanted to see the world.”

She says the military gave her that. It also gave her a greater openness to different kinds of people, more awareness of her own strength and resourcefulness, as well as a sense of connection to her fellow soldiers—“my brothers and sisters”—that she says will never be broken. She forged those bonds serving with a Patriot missile air defense artillery unit during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. On those convoys, Boblitt says, “We’d get trapped in towns

“I’ll hear an explosion, and nobody else has heard it ... I take stock and realize what happened, and go on.”

—Gerry Barker, U.S. Army veteran





and people would surround our vehicles. You don't know who could be a suicide bomber."

There's a psychological impact from the constant vigilance of a war zone and the proximity to combat. "You never feel safe. You never are safe," she says. "You numb yourself to everything. Stay focused and do what you're trained to do."

She felt lucky when she left the Army seemingly unscarred. Moved on. Played professional basketball. Learned Spanish. Got an MBA and a good job. The symptoms came later.

Boblitt lives in the Nelson County community of Boston and says sometimes she's driving on Interstate 65 and suddenly, "I won't have any idea where I am. Where am I going? This doesn't look familiar." She often feels hypervigilant and hyperprotective of those around her. She insists on driving because "I feel trapped if I ride with other people driving."

Boblitt's found multiple ways to cope. She started her own business, Mindful Movement, in 2016, teaching movement and games to children and yoga to combat veterans from World War II as well as the

present. She's one of the founding members of the performing troupe Shakespeare with Veterans (see sidebar below). But one of the best treatments she's found for the claustrophobic feelings associated with

Kentucky's suicide rate among veterans is 34 percent higher than the national average.

PTSD is to hit the hiking trails. Her Army training helps, "I can go camping in Yellowstone by myself for a month and a half. My mom says, 'Anything could happen to you out there by yourself.' But the way I look at it, nobody's trying to kill me. So I'll probably be all right."

Boblitt recently started Mindful Adventures, a new business venture in which she helps lead extended wilderness excursions. She's primarily focused on children, but has plans to offer outings for veterans.

Going into the forest and working with kids and veterans has helped Boblitt feel a sense of purpose and comfort. "It's through these connections that we heal," she says.

The idea of time in nature as a source of healing isn't new, though the scientific research supporting the idea is. According to a 2016 *National Geographic* article that surveyed recent studies, "A 15-minute walk in the woods causes measurable changes in physiology." The article also references a 2015 report

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ONLINE

Shakespeare speaks to veterans

William Shakespeare spoke to the human condition in his plays, and that human condition encompasses veterans who are coping with their service experiences. Find out how Fred Johnson, a Kentucky veteran, inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, went on to co-found a theater group, Shakespeare with Veterans.



■ Veterans visiting Camp Brown Bear near Frankfort take in a peaceful yoga class. The camp was started by former U.S. Navy SEAL Steve Brown, who also took the photo.

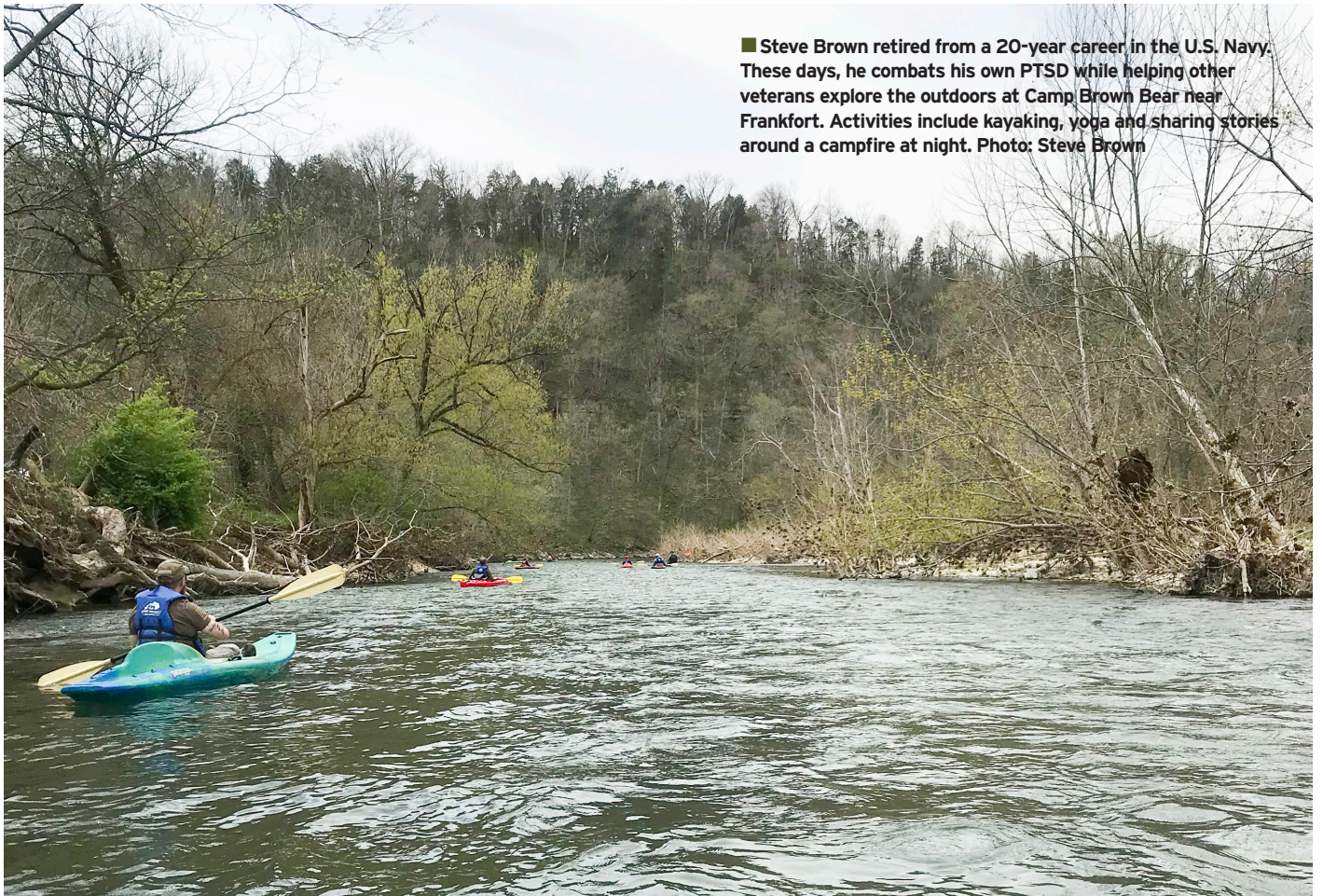
Boblitt's passion for the wilderness was kindled by joining a Sierra Club Military Outdoors tour. The Wounded Warrior Project's website also talks about "using nature and recreation to heal the spirit" through its Project Odyssey program.

Camp Brown Bear

Former U.S. Navy SEAL Steve Brown participated in a Project Odyssey outing in 2015. He'd recently retired after a 20-year career and his PTSD hit him especially hard at night. "There were times, my wife was changing our bedding out two-three times a night because I was sweating through the sheets," he says. He also suffers from traumatic brain injury (TBI), the byproduct of combat, hard falls and proximity to explosions while conducting more than 250 high-risk operations, mostly, he says, "to places I wouldn't want to go on vacation."

TBI, which often affects memory function as well as concentration, sleep and mood, is part of his everyday life. "If there's something important I need

published in the journal *Psychological Science* that says, "Imagine a therapy that had no known side effects, was readily available, and could improve your cognitive functioning at zero cost. Such a therapy has been known to philosophers, writers and laypeople alike: interacting with nature."



■ Steve Brown retired from a 20-year career in the U.S. Navy. These days, he combats his own PTSD while helping other veterans explore the outdoors at Camp Brown Bear near Frankfort. Activities include kayaking, yoga and sharing stories around a campfire at night. Photo: Steve Brown



■ Veteran's Club of Louisville provides equine therapy for veterans, like Cookie Jones, who recently attended a session in Shelby County through the Salvation Army. Photo: Thomas Hart Shelby

to do tomorrow, I have to write it down today or I won't remember it," Brown says. He also doesn't like crowds, even small ones: "I feel like I've got to know who every person is around me. It's really draining."

His wife, Sabrina, says they've had to adjust the way they communicate. "It's very hard for a person with TBI to argue because they can't remember what's been said," she explains. "Sometimes we go to text messaging so he can read over the conversation." Sabrina Brown is an associate professor of epidemiology at University of Kentucky and is writing a book about their experiences. She says one challenge for veterans like her husband is that "they're used to being the hero, leading the command. Now, they can't remember if they've taken their medicine. There's a self-esteem issue." In his darkest time, she says, "Sometimes Steve wouldn't get out of bed for days."

Steve found comfort and solace on the Wounded Warrior retreat, both from being in nature and being

with fellow veterans who understood what he was experiencing. He'd had a dream about opening a camp that would serve children, but now he realized he should create a camp for veterans as well. He found a property for sale north of Frankfort that at one time was home to a church camp. The Browns, consumers of Blue Grass Energy, bought it and created Camp Brown Bear, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that's part of a larger operation, Kodiak Camps and Outfitters.

He welcomes veterans' groups for weekend retreats every three months or so. Their daytime activities include hiking, kayaking and canoeing. Sometimes they hunt with bow and arrow. They journal and share stories around a campfire at night. The veterans also help renovate the cabins on the 120-acre property so Steve can eventually open the camp to the other population he wants to serve: middle school-aged boys growing up in disadvantaged circumstances. He usually invites a local pastor as well as professionals to lead yoga, meditation and





other activities. He's developing a more robust curriculum for veterans based on the National Intrepid Center of Excellence at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

Brown tries to keep in touch with alumni of the camp, building a social support network. To his fellow veterans, Brown says, "Don't struggle in silence. There are people out there who want to help, and who are dealing with the same things you are."

A Soldier's Heart Bluegrass and Muddy Waters

One of the most enthusiastic testimonials on the Camp Brown Bear website reads, "By far, this is the best therapy I've had over the years of fighting PTSD."

Those are the words of Jeremy Wallace, who lives in the Marshall County community of Gilbertsville and is a member of West Kentucky RECC. He's a former National Guardsman who spent 15 months in Iraq providing convoy security and combat patrol. Wallace says his unit lost only one of about 80 guardsmen to combat. Since coming home, they've lost at least three to suicide, and nearly lost a fourth.

"And I was suicidal," he says. "Killing myself seemed like the logical answer. It kept running through my head like a CD skipping and repeating itself."

VA TO VETS: JUST REACH OUT

One significant factor in determining whether or not a veteran dies by suicide is whether they seek and receive care.

That's according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which recently updated its 2016 report on veteran suicide, a problem the report refers to as "our highest clinical priority."

The VA reports that 85 percent of veteran suicides happen among veterans who were not receiving mental health services through that agency.

To help ensure veterans can get the mental health services they need, the VA provides a crisis line for veterans and their loved ones—(800) 273-8255, press 1 or text 838255—and has made efforts to reduce wait times for veterans, particularly for those seeking mental health appointments.

Lora Johnson is suicide prevention coordinator at the Robley Rex VA

Medical Center in Louisville. "If someone is talking about suicide, we'll do whatever is needed. They're not going to be turned away," she says.

Johnson says there are hundreds of variables and risk factors that influence whether an individual goes from depression or anxiety to being suicidal, though some of the more significant factors can be job loss, divorce, financial or health crisis or, "when they feel like they're a burden, or like they don't belong anymore."

Fundamentally, "Each person is unique and has to be approached individually," she says. "The work is about helping them figure out what within themselves is keeping them alive." Johnson says she and other therapists "work to help veterans discover the things that have kept them connected to living; the things that have helped

them to stay alive even in the face of extreme hardships."

That work might involve considering the effect of a veteran's potential suicide on their loved ones. Research shows that after family members lose a loved one to suicide, they themselves become greater risks for suicide.

Johnson understands that many veterans are reluctant to open up about painful experiences. "It's hard sometimes," she says, "but it can definitely be worth it."

For more information:
www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention

VA Crisis Line: (800) 273-8255, press 1 or text 838255

■ As part of the equine therapy session, veterans like Ben Middleton, got to talk with, pet and groom the horses at Lone Pear Ridge Farm in Waddy. Photo: Thomas Hart Shelby

■ Left, veteran David MacIntire enjoyed meeting this canine at Lone Pear Ridge Farm in Waddy during an equine therapy session with the Veteran's Club of Louisville.

■ Veteran Johnny Rogers says hello to Patina, an 18-year-old mare. Farm owner Jim Burke says, "She's got the smoothest gait you can imagine. You could sit on her and drink a cup of tea." Burke and his wife, Diana, offer therapy through horsemanship. Photos: Thomas Hart Shelby

What kept him from pulling that trigger?
"My wife and kids," he says.

Wallace has founded his own outdoor retreat and outing non-profit, A Soldier's Heart Bluegrass and Muddy Waters. The retreats are entirely free and Wallace covers expenses by organizing fund-raising concerts and from other private donations. "I was on about 17 different medications," he says. "Since I started this getting out in nature, now I'm down to three."

There are many other examples of veterans finding healing in Kentucky's great outdoors. The Kentucky-based charity Active Heroes has a retreat center with cabins in rural Bullitt County. The state's Veterans Center in Hazard takes residents (some of whom served in World War II) on field trips to nearby Jenny Wiley State Resort Park.





■ There's no universal answer to which therapy is best for each person, but Gerry Barker finds comfort in his animals. "They have a wonderful, calming effect," he says. Photo: Joe Imel

For some, the interactions with nature focus on animals. The Louisville-based Veteran's Club is one of several organizations with an equine program. Army National Guard member and Afghanistan veteran Deborah Sawyer enjoyed one of the club's recent equine sessions in Shelby County.

"The horses didn't need any explanations about who I was or what I could do. They just accepted me," something she says she doesn't always feel from civilians who can be "very judgmental and ask a lot of questions." Overall, Sawyer says, "It was encouraging to watch the trust being developed between my brothers and the other horses."

There's no one answer to addressing the complex mental health challenges like PTSD, TBI and other conditions that contribute to veterans' suicide rates. It's also worth noting that not all veterans have served in combat and not all experience PTSD or experience it to the same degree. Some veterans respond well to talk therapy, to pharmaceuticals or some combination of these. Clinical help is still the recommended first stop for anyone struggling with mental health issues, especially thoughts of suicide.

Still, in a battle as fierce, complicated and necessary as the one our country is fighting against PTSD and suicide, we have to take our victories where we find them and use every tool that gives our veterans an advantage, no matter how unlikely the form.

Gerry Barker understands that. He tends to self-medicate too often with bourbon and solitude, he says. But even after all he's been through, he's still around, at 74.

He says one reason for that is the farm where he's lived for 21 years. There, his companions have included his wife, Maria, as well as a collection of animals that sounds like something between Old McDonald's farm and Noah's Ark. "We had 22 horses at one point. 40 ducks. We had oxen. I loved them. I could work oxen all day," Barker says, lamenting that these days, "We're down to just 21 goats."

Then this man who overloaded on war calls his goats, "great friends."

"The other day, one just came over to me and put her head on my lap. They're a delight. They have a wonderful, calming effect." **KL**

SEEK HELP HERE

Shakespeare with Veterans co-founder Fred Johnson has written about his experiences before, during and after serving in combat in his book *Five Wars*. <http://fivewars.com>

PTSD information and resources: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov>

Veterans Crisis Line: (800) 273-8255, press 1, text 838255, or web chat; deaf or hard of hearing call (800) 799-4889, www.veteranscrisisline.net

Here are the websites of the veterans' organizations in the story:

- Louisville VA Medical Center, www.louisville.va.gov
- Camp Brown Bear, <http://kodiakcampsandoutfitters.com/ptsdtbi-recovery>
- A Soldier's Heart Bluegrass and Muddy Waters, www.facebook.com/bluegrassandmuddywaters
- Mindful Adventures, www.mindful-adventures.com
- Veteran's Club, www.facebook.com/louisvilleveteransclub
- Active Heroes, <https://activeheroes.org>

