

Vets Connect, Heal at All-Female Retreat

by Kelly Von Lunen

“I used to not be able to talk about my past and what I’ve gone through, but by watching every brave soul there talk about their experiences, it helped me to break out of my shell.”

— Hlee Yang Cruckson

PHOTO COURTESY HLEE YANG CRUCKSON

An all-expenses-paid trip from the California-based *Coming Home Project* gives 60 female veterans the time, space and techniques to cope with psychological stress or to simply readjust to civilian life.

Today, Hlee Yang Cruckson readily admits that she “didn’t have a very good childhood.” She wasn’t always willing to divulge her life story, but at 27 years old, she’s ready to start sharing and start healing.

“I came from a very abusive Hmong [hill tribes from Laos that came to the U.S. as refugees after the Vietnam War] family and was married off at 15 in an arranged marriage,” she said. She lived through tumultuous teenage years and early 20s, she said.

Throughout, Cruckson tried to stay strong for herself and her children. When she finished high school in 2001, her plan was to go to college to study criminal justice. Then one day, Army recruiters were at her mother’s house trying to get her younger siblings to join.

“I happened to walk in while they were chatting with my family,” she recalled. “I thought to myself ‘here is my chance.’ The very next day, I went into the recruiter’s office.”

After the Sept. 11, 2001, Islamic terrorist attacks, Cruckson went to basic training. But later at Fort Hood, Texas, she was sexually assaulted, she said. According to VA’s National Center for PTSD, 23% of female veterans report having been sexually assaulted in the military. Cruckson struggled to cope with the situation, while at the same time undergoing a divorce.

“There was an investigation but it didn’t go anywhere,” she said. “Everyone in my unit looked at me like it was my fault.”

During that time, her unit readied for action in Afghanistan. She helped prepare for the deployment, but was honorably discharged in March 2003.

Helping Women Feel ‘Not Alone’

For Cruckson and 59 other women vets, the *Coming Home Project* has stepped in to help with military sexual trauma, PTSD and other issues resulting from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Formed in 2006 in San Francisco, the *Coming Home Project* is a non-profit organization devoted to providing care, support, education and stress manage-

ment tools for recent vets.

Joseph Bobrow, now president of the *Coming Home Project*, founded the organization along with veterans and inter-faith leaders to meet the challenges faced by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families.

A clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst, Bobrow is a former chief of psychology and director of training in the Department of Psychiatry at Kaiser Hospital and Medical Center in San Francisco. Also a Zen master (teacher of Zen Buddhism), he teaches and writes on the role of Western psychology, Buddhism and the community in rehabilitating war-related trauma.

Funded by donations and grants, the *Coming Home Project* operates with five staff members, a board of advisors and many volunteers. In October 2009, it held a retreat in California specifically for female veterans.

“At first, I really thought this was not the right time for me to be here ... However, this retreat has given me the strength that I have needed for some time now.”

— LaTisha M. Bowen, Iraq veteran

Women veterans had attended *Coming Home Project* retreats in the past, but they were always in the minority. Bobrow recognized that female vets often struggle with different issues than male veterans.

“I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I’ve never had a more intense experience,” Bobrow said of the women’s retreat.

At that retreat, the women met in both large and small groups. Resilience-building skills classes provided coping strategies, and the women experienced meditation practice. For women with severe trauma, the goal of the retreat was to help them tap into something not traumatic or suffering.

“The retreat exceeded our expecta-

tions,” Bobrow said. “The women conveyed afterward that they felt that they were not alone.”

The retreat accepted 60 participants out of 600 applicants. A little more than half of the attendees were active-duty military, and all were Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans. Women came from all around the country, all expenses paid.

‘We Wore Our Helmets to Sleep’

In March 2004, Cruckson joined the California National Guard. “Life settled down for me,” she said. “I began to pretend that nothing happened and that it was all a very bad dream.”

Cruckson moved and transferred to the Florida National Guard two months later. In August 2005, she deployed as an automated logistics specialist to Al Asad, Iraq, with HQ Co., HQ Detachment, 553rd Corps Support Bn., 64th Corps Support Grp., 13th Corps Support



Command.

During Cruckson’s first night in Iraq, her unit was attacked.

“I was on the top bunk with other soldiers, and we were getting ready to go to bed,” she remembered. “We didn’t have any gear on and just when the lights went out for bed, we got hit. The ground shook, and we were thrown off of our bunks. Thankfully, no one was hurt. Some of us wore our helmets to sleep.”

Cruckson says she also witnessed other soldiers burning to death. “I can hear their screaming for help, and I see them reaching their hands out to me,” she said. “I was so scared; I couldn’t do anything to help them.”

While stationed in Iraq, additional

incidents occurred, triggering negative memories that had been buried for a long time. "It then brought back everything that had happened to me in the earlier years."

Cruckson served 4½ years in the active Army and National Guard and is a disabled veteran. She now lives in Wisconsin with her new husband and five children.

In the beginning of 2009, she started having trouble again. Cruckson suffers from PTSD, depression and anxiety. Service-connected back, knee and internal injuries have put her in a wheelchair, and she is on several medications for chronic pain.

"All of my problems that I ignored and pushed away deep down inside of me have come back to haunt me," she said. "Everything in Iraq replays in my head, my dreams and [real life]. I feel like it's happening all over again."

Today, Cruckson calls the retreat one of the best experiences in her life. "I used to not be able to talk about my past and what I've gone through," she said, "but by watching every brave soul

there talk about their experiences, it helped me to break out of my shell."

'My Energy Has Come Back'

LaTisha M. Bowen, a 32-year-old from Cleveland, said she was overwhelmed by the beautiful retreat. She particularly enjoyed meeting women with different backgrounds who served in various units.

"I'm not around females that much," she said. "That's one reason I went—I'm not one to get along with females too well. But it was so much fun. I made some good connections."

A former specialist with 350th Psychological Operations Company, Bowen served in Iraq from August 2004 to June 2005.

"For the things we discussed at the retreat, it was important for there to be just women," Bowen said. "There are certain things that we go through differently. There are double standards in the military. You still have to do your job, but there are certain things you have to do twice as well just because you are a female."

Following the retreat, vet Shauna Jones

wrote: "The energy that I used to have has come back a little. The energy of all the nice people here has given me a sense of peace, goodness and warmth within myself that I will never forget."

Jones says that through meditation, she discovered that she has a hard time relaxing and just breathing.

"At first, I really thought this was not the right time for me to be here," Jones, a mother, said. "I am a graduate student, and I had a paper to write for the next week. My partner helping me write the paper just bailed out on me the night before I left. However, this retreat has given me the strength that I have needed for some time now."

'A Special Time for Women to Bond'

Staff Sgt. Tihara Vargas left the Army Reserve in 2005, but as a result of the women's retreat is considering rejoining.

The 30-year-old Puerto Rico native deployed to Baghdad in 2004-05 with the 4th Bn., 227th Avn. Regt., 1st Air Cav Bde., 1st Cav Div., to start an education center in Al Taji.

Later as a civilian, she interned with VA and researched PTSD for her degree. Working with other veterans who were undergoing group therapy, she found that she had an instant bond with other vets.

Vargas says attending the retreat was "life-changing" for her. "I found what I want to do in my life," she said. "I'm exploring the opportunities to go back into the military as a chaplain. I am shocked to find myself even entertaining this."

Like the other retreat attendees, Vargas says that women can often feel isolated. However, she was amazed at how well the women at the retreat got along.

"There was this instantaneous rapport and openness," she said. "We all just laughed and connected. It was a special time for women to bond as women." ♡

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