

Growing and Healing

Vets Struggling With Trauma Work Down on the Farm

By Jordan Strickler

Chris Dorsey knew something was wrong; he just didn't know what. Since returning stateside in 2005 after a yearlong tour in Iraq, he had gone through a failed relationship, drank excessively, couldn't hold down a job and had begun to alienate himself from his family. He says his visits to doctors had resulted in a cocktail of medications, including opioids, which only intensified his troubles.

"When I look back on it now, I realize it was a textbook case of PTSD," the former Army specialist said.

He is not alone. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, as of September 2018, post-traumatic stress disorder affects 11% to 20% of those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. It affects another 12% of those who served in the First Gulf War. Fifteen percent of Vietnam veterans were diagnosed with PTSD in the most recent study of that generation, the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, conducted in the late 1980s.

An unusual vocation is becoming a literal lifesaver for those suffering from the disorder—agriculture.

Gardening as Therapy

In 2017, the VA published a study in *Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, a publication of the American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine, illustrating the potential that agriculture has in assisting mental health for veterans. Researchers found that those who participated in veteran-oriented farm-to-market community agricultural initiatives reported improvements in the

Former Spc. Chris Dorsey keeps beef cattle on his farm in Georgia.

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physical and mental health factors that impact veteran reintegration.

Dorsey backed this up, saying farming quite possibly saved his life. "Throughout this whole time, I always had a garden," he said. "In 2014, I realized that I was using gardening and agriculture on a small scale as therapy. After discovering that this was becoming a source of recovery, I sat down with a couple of veterans and formulated a plan to help treat other vets the same way. I needed it to save myself and save others."

So Dorsey, who farms about 4 acres in Georgia, helped start the Warrior Farms program, assisting veterans suffering from issues such as PTSD to regain their footing in life.

"We've gotten veterans out of the woods who have been suicidal and gotten them on the farm and helped them along their journey. We have vets come to us for classes. We have vets that are just interested in agriculture in general, and we even have vets who aren't interested in agriculture, but who just come and hang out and volunteer with us for the camaraderie," Dorsey said.

It isn't just Dorsey and other veterans who need saving. It's agriculture itself.

Call to Action

The median age of American farmers is almost 60 and is continuing to rise. Farmers are retiring with no one taking their place. Less than 1% of the

American population considers themselves full-time farmers.

Fortunately, veterans are once again taking up the call to action and coming to the industry's rescue. Whether it's growing crops, raising cattle or tending beehives, agriculture and veterans have a symbiotic relationship. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 2017 Census of Agriculture, over 370,000 veterans have made the transition to farming.

The veteran/farmer movement got a big boost with the 2014 Farm Bill, officially called the Agricultural Act of 2014. Under the law, the USDA designated veterans as a distinct class of beginning farmers, allowing them access to low-interest rate loans to buy animals and equipment. The law also allows them to apply for grants to upgrade their farms and can aid them in receiving extra payments to implement conservation practices on their land. One program—the National Institute of Food and Agriculture's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program—allocated \$5 million toward getting veterans training and access to land so they can start their own farms.

Finding Salvation

Former Pfc. Adam Ingrao was a Patriot missile fire controller who suffered a major training injury and was medically discharged from the Army in 2005. After going through regular VA channels, he found himself with substance addictions and needed help. He found his salvation in beekeeping.

"At the time, opioids were being handed out like candy, and I was one of the vets who was on the receiving end of that," Ingrao said. "That led to some substance-abuse issues. I found beekeeping as I was going back to school under the GI Bill, and that was really the first time during my life since I left the military that I felt like I had some direction."

Ingrao earned a doctorate in entomology and is the agricultural entomologist educator and veteran liaison at Michigan State University. He is also founder and instructor of the

Michigan State University Extension Heroes to Hives program, and the former director of two nonprofits serving farmer veterans in Michigan—the Michigan Food and Farming Systems' Veterans in Agriculture Network and the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Michigan. He has two bee farms.

Heroes to Hives is one of the largest veteran/farmer training programs in the nation. More than 400 veterans and their dependents have gone through the nine-month program over its four seasons, with another 300 expected to sign up for 2020. Ingrao has found it especially beneficial for veterans who suffer from PTSD.

Learning Mindfulness

One of the most successful aspects of the program geared toward these veterans is what Ingrao calls "mindfulness while beekeeping."

"What we see [with PTSD sufferers] is that they really start to relax a little more. One of the main things we focus on, and one of the things that our veterans with PTSD get from our program, is this notion that you can practice mindfulness on your own in your backyard with your bees. The way that we do that is that you have to be very conscious of what you are doing while you are working with the bees. If you start getting distracted and thinking about other things, then usually what ends up happening is that you get stung," Ingrao said.

"A large part of the program consists of yoga, essentially stretching the muscles which will be used for beekeeping, and active meditation while keeping an active beehive. That's where you really get into the structure of how you use beekeeping for wellness.

"Veterans are generally people who want to serve purposes bigger than themselves, and they see this as a potential way to continue serving their country, by serving America's food system. What they're doing is a national service. While also helping themselves,

they are simultaneously helping our country by protecting our food security."

Army Does Its Part

To facilitate the increased interest in veterans pursuing agriculture, the Army has begun to offer many career training opportunities through its Career Skills Program to soldiers who are in the process of leaving the service. Those who are within 180 days of separation can receive permissive temporary duty orders to attend training to learn agricultural skills, or other skills such as welding, truck driving or business management.

Additional joint ventures between the Army and universities have begun to facilitate a smooth transfer to agriculture, such as the Soldier to Agriculture Program run by North Carolina State University, which offers a free five-week Career Skills Program training opportunity at Fort Bragg. Participants, while still on active duty, can receive hands-on training in a variety of agricultural-related fields, as well as mentorship and assistance in starting a farming career.

"I get asked all of the time, 'What is the attraction to agriculture?'" Dorsey said. "There is no singular answer. One of the worst things for vets with PTSD is idle time, and there isn't much of that on the farm. Farming gets your mind out of those dark places, and that is a huge advantage from a post-traumatic side of things. As vets, sometimes we get angry and put out energies in a negative way. A lot of these animals and plants we work with can't deal with those negative energies, and that teaches us reinforcement. When you get in those moments,

you know that you can just get lost with your crops and your animals." ★

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FORMER SPC. CHRIS DORSEY

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