



SHOW UP for a STAND DOWN

by Carole A. Sarian, CHTP

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The term STAND DOWN comes from a military order reserved for a moment of extreme emergency. In times of war, exhausted combat units requiring time to rest and recover are removed from the battlefield to a place of relative security and safety. Battle-weary soldiers are given the opportunity to renew their spirit, health and overall sense of well-being.

In this article, STAND DOWN refers to a grassroots, community-based intervention program, designed in 1988 by a couple of Vietnam Veterans from San Diego, to help our nation's estimated 200,000 homeless veterans "combat" life on the streets. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, the current number of homeless

Vietnam era veterans exceeds the number of fatalities that occurred during the war. It is estimated that 500,000 - 840,000 veterans are homeless at some time during the year.

Community and government agencies, along with hundreds of volunteers, come together in cities throughout our country (see list below) to help support the numerous needs of veterans who are labeled homeless. These weekend events, held for one to three days, offer "one stop" services. The guiding philosophy is "a hand-up, not a hand-out."

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For the past two years, I've had the good fortune of being San Diego's Healing Touch Volunteer Coordinator for the STAND DOWN. It's a perfect fit for me and I am most grateful to have been afforded the opportunity. My husband is a Navy veteran and as a Chaplain he has also led a men's group at St. Vincent de Paul's Village which houses those who are labeled homeless. He has shared numerous stories with me, primarily how so many of our veterans have never been thanked for serving our country -- an unhealed wound.

Further, we've both been serving veterans extensively at the La Jolla VA Medical Center for the past seven years as bedside volunteers and hospice volunteer trainers for the Twilight Brigade/*Compassion in Action*, a non-profit, National organization that trains people how to be at the bedside with those who are actively dying -- mostly veterans. (www.thetwilightbrigade.com)

A STAND DOWN is unlike anything I've ever seen before. Basically, a downtown high school athletic field is commandeered and transformed into a military camp reminiscent of the MASH movie set. It's a fantastic feat and I can't imagine the amount of work that goes into creating this tent city.

The predominant colors are khaki and shades of camouflage green. American flags are seen flying in every direction, along with the distinctive black and white MIA/POW flags. People are everywhere -- some in uniform, some carrying new clothing and shoes, and some wearing identifiable STAND DOWN ID badges required of all volunteers and personnel.

Wandering towards the Alternative Medicine Tent, sponsored by Pacific College of Oriental Medicine (PCOM), I passed by innumerable tents lined up in neat rows housing hundreds of cots, each sponsored by a different

community organization. In the center of the field there's a sort of "town-square" made up of rows of tents identified by large signs offering specific services such as free legal and social security benefits counseling, employment services, and substance abuse counseling.

Twelve-step meetings could be seen in progress and I noticed a tent marked Spiritual Guidance with a few men meeting one-on-one with what I assumed to be Chaplains. There are people busy setting up food lines, (volunteers are urged to go to the front of the line) groups of people sitting under the shade of an expansive camouflaged net listening to someone play a guitar, and people waiting in line to use one of a long-line of port-o-potties.

A large white mobile unit attached to a loud generator is parked just outside the gate offering free medical and dental care. There's an enclosed area set-up for showering, and nearby I noticed several women standing behind men cutting their hair.

Inside the Alternative Medicine tent, there were over twenty massage tables set-up, along with a large assortment of folding chairs, all provided by PCOM. The surrounding perimeter of the tent was lined with folding chairs where clients watched and waited to be called and volunteers could sit and bear witness by listening to their stories. There was a large menu of healing options from which to choose: acupuncture, reflexology, massage, Tui Na (a form of Chinese acupressure), and Healing Touch.

All HT levels are welcomed to volunteer. Level 1 techniques are primarily used -- mostly the Pain Drain. Sessions are usually 10-20 minutes in length. Sometimes they last up to 30 minutes if there are no other clients waiting. During meals when there are very few clients, practitioners could be seen taking turns working on each other.

Mostly, though, men line up to be touched. Some of them come back repeatedly in the same day and often return

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the following days, as well. As a mother, I often found myself reflecting upon the fact that these men were once someone's child--a beloved son. Perhaps they're a brother, father, uncle, or grandfather, as well. I try to move past the thought of what might have happened...of why they are now living on the streets...or with what demons they might be dealing.

In addition to the healing benefits of the actual hands on of Healing Touch, listening...just listening, is extremely powerful. I listened with compassion as a man who just had a tooth "yanked" shared with me what it was like for him in Vietnam. I listened with tears in my eyes as



Above: A volunteer gives Healing Touch to a homeless veteran.

another man shared with me the unbearable pain he has in his left leg due to being shot and then having had surgery with a razor blade while he was a prisoner of war. And I listened with heartache as a man shared how "messed up" his back was from sleeping on the streets.

Whenever I responded with empathy and validation to each shared story, there seemed to be a letting go...a deeper sense of relaxation...a calmness and peacefulness, as we entered together into the stillness of the moment.

With our right hands gently connected, and my left hand placed on their hearts, I meet each man heart-to-heart -- highest good to highest. I ask to be a channel of healing. I ask that all Divine Specialists, in whatever field each man may need, work through me so as best to serve them. I welcome all beings of the highest love, light and healing to assist me. And then... I just love them...unconditionally.

Some are easier to love than others. By late afternoon, under the heat of the sun, body odor can become more apparent. I'm grateful for the occasional breeze that blows fresh air into our tent and also for the trick I learned of rubbing a bit of Vicks Vapo-rub under my nose to mask unpleasant scents.

This year the most moving moment for me was when I entered the Alternative Medicine tent on Sunday in what seemed to be total silence, despite the hundreds of people milling about. I saw Michelle Lemarie, Shirley Smalley and Fran Prayfsa each working on a camouflage-dressed soldier, rather than our weekend population of people who are homeless. There was a sacred stillness that was palpable, accompanied by a major, full body rush. And from past experiences, I've learned to pay closer attention to both the energy and experience

What I saw were three men/boys lying on the treatment tables. And although these guys were active duty, they

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looked to be about fifteen -- no facial hair and with such baby-faces. Being the mother of an adult son, I felt my eyes welling up. I thought of their mothers, their girlfriends, their families...

They shared with their practitioners how much the Healing Touch treatments meant to them and how it was the most relaxed they had been in the longest while. They also shared stories of deep aches, chronic pains and tales of stress.

I don't know how to go about manifesting it, but I so want to have a large facility, in every major city, where treatment tables could be permanently set-up and returning military could receive on-going treatments as often as necessary. And so long as I'm "putting it out there," I want these to be peaceful place of healing where practitioners can work full-time and be fully compensated, along with receiving health benefits.

I have no doubt that our work is important and needed. And it seems to me that we have a multitude of compassionate practitioners who are willing and available to serve, and a large military population who deserve to be served and supported with compassion. [🔗](#)

Carole's Bio:

Carole Sarian recently completed her first novel, *Living with Lottie* which delves into the daily dramas of dementia. She is a Special Education Teacher and Certified Healing Touch Practitioner currently in teacher training with visions of teaching Healing Touch to women in prisons, to Hospice volunteers, and to parents and staff of children with special needs.

In addition to being the San Diego trainer for The Twilight Brigade/*Compassion in Action*, she is also a Certified Grief© Specialist, a Certified Integrative Breathwork Practitioner in the Eupsychia Process, and a practicing Zen Buddhist married to a Zen Buddhist priest and Hospice Chaplain, with shared fantasies of traveling the country together on their Harley offering trainings, lectures, and book signings. She also offers Healing Touch and Massage at a Day Spa in Del Mar, CA.