

Burlington County Times, Wednesday, November 11, 2015

# Mullane: For veterans, a place to seek peace in Westampton

Posted: Wednesday, November 11, 2015 6:30 am

By J.D. Mullane, News columnist

Nearly a half-century after the war, Al Hagovsky still reacts when he hears the chop-chop sound.

“Helicopters,” he said. “Even all these years later, helicopters get me. If a helicopter flies over, I stop, and the feelings come back. Because that’s how we got our wounded. It doesn’t go away, and I’m not alone.”

Hagovsky served in the Navy during Vietnam. He was stationed aboard the SS Sanctuary, a Haven-class hospital ship where wounded warriors from that long-ago conflict in Southeast Asia were flown. (The ship’s unofficial motto: “You find ’em, we bind ’em. Open 24 hours.”)

To those who served, war is never long ago. Veterans, like Hagovsky, are haunted by the war experience. Postwar stressors aren’t uncommon among vets or active-duty military, like those aboard the Sanctuary, who saw the ravages of war on mind and body.

“So, I come here,” Hagovsky said, as we stood amid the rolling grounds of the Rancocas Nature Center in Westampton.

He lives across the street, and it has become his new sanctuary, where he walks the winding trails. He also volunteers. The school psychologist, retired from the Burlington County Institute of Technology, said he looks forward to helping students from BCIT clear a meadow. The beauty and peace here have a calming effect. He believes it can benefit other veterans who experience the lingering effects of their war experiences.

Last Sunday, the nature center had a Military Appreciation Day, its effort to preach the healing powers of nature to some 31,000 veterans who, according to the 2013 U.S. census, live in Burlington County.

“The research on the health benefits of spending just 20 minutes a day outdoors is overwhelming,” said Toni Price, who co-chairs the Friends of the Rancocas Nature Center.

“All of us who enjoy the outdoors already know this,” said Price, a beekeeper who farms 65 acres in Tabernacle.

Price said research from Cornell University shows that veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder can calm themselves and feel better just sitting outside, listening to natural sounds.

“This nature center can help them, whether they just take a walk or participate in programs,” she said. “There are studies that show even putting one’s hand in soil helps, because there are microbes that somehow — it’s not clear how —help people relax. There’s a technique in Japan called ‘forest bathing,’ which can be something as simple as walking in the woods. It can lower blood pressure.

“PTSD is still treated with traditional therapies. But there is something called the Green Road Project from Walter Reed (National Military Medical Center) that shows that a forested, treed area provides respite for the families as well, because there is stress on families and children of active-duty military.”

C. Andre Daniels, an Air Force veteran and Westampton councilman, delivered a few appropriate remarks at Sunday afternoon’s Military Appreciation Day. Afterward, he told me, “The value of this place is simple. Many who serve come back with post-traumatic stress. The reality of it is, on beautiful autumn days like this, communing with nature, plus having people here say, ‘We love you!’ is a prescription for veterans that no doctor can write.”

Al Hagovsky walked through the sunny meadow.

“There’s no tonic like being outside. The peace, the quiet,” he said. “That’s what I do for relaxation. We travel. There’s nothing like being in the great outdoors. But in the last couple of weeks, what I’ve realized, just starting to volunteer here, is that you don’t have to travel to Alaska or Yellowstone, where I’ve just been. You can get the same feeling in the nature center.

“It’s hard to be negative walking through woods, you know, seeing wildlife up close, the leaves changing and falling. And the silence. In my backyard, I can still hear traffic noises, but a walk over here, and it’s peaceful.”

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