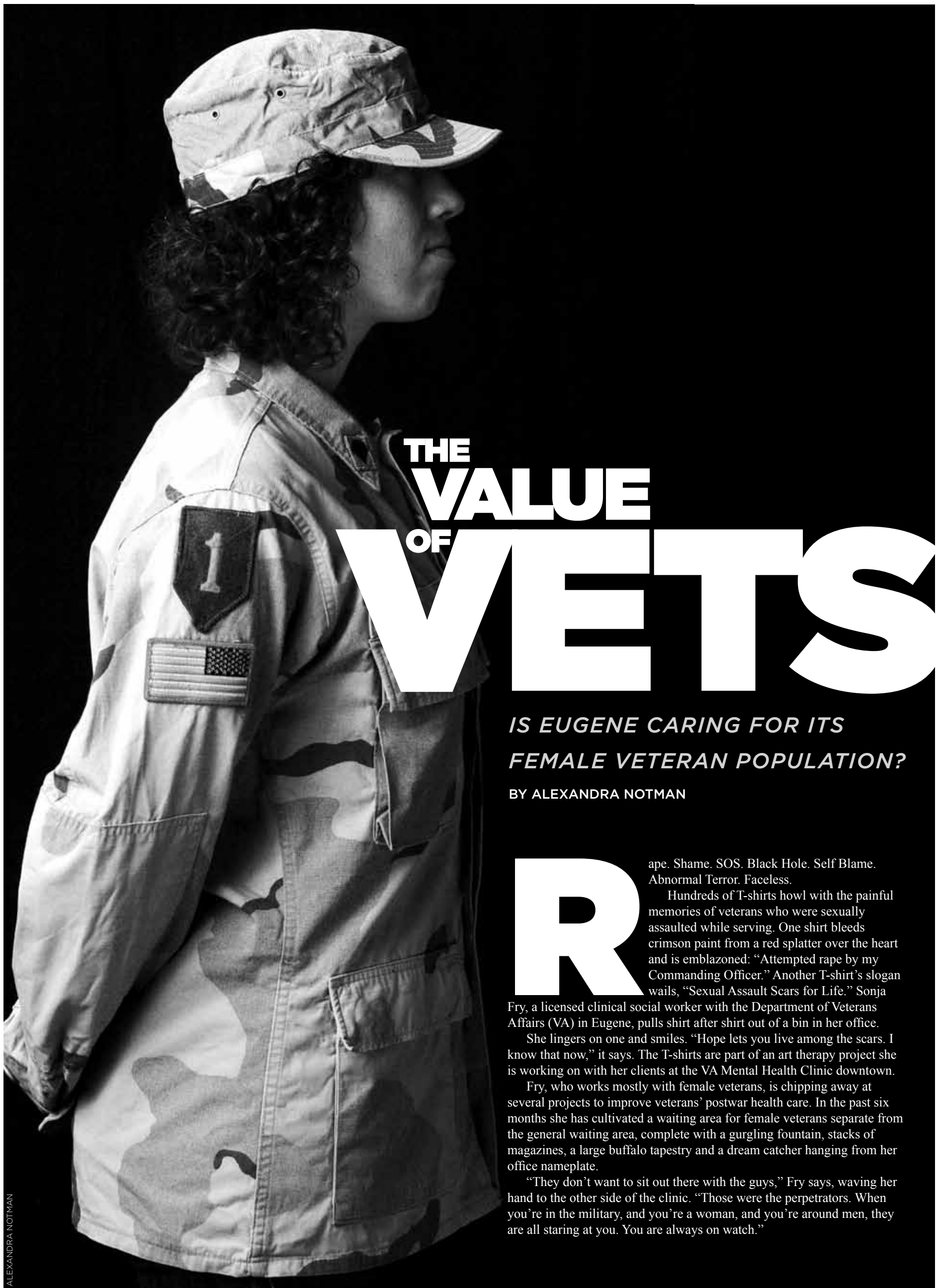




ALEXANDRA NOTMAN

THE VALUE OF VETS

*IS EUGENE CARING FOR ITS
FEMALE VETERAN POPULATION?*

BY ALEXANDRA NOTMAN

Rape. Shame. SOS. Black Hole. Self Blame. Abnormal Terror. Faceless.

Hundreds of T-shirts howl with the painful memories of veterans who were sexually assaulted while serving. One shirt bleeds crimson paint from a red splatter over the heart and is emblazoned: "Attempted rape by my Commanding Officer." Another T-shirt's slogan wails, "Sexual Assault Scars for Life." Sonja Fry, a licensed clinical social worker with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in Eugene, pulls shirt after shirt out of a bin in her office.

She lingers on one and smiles. "Hope lets you live among the scars. I know that now," it says. The T-shirts are part of an art therapy project she is working on with her clients at the VA Mental Health Clinic downtown.

Fry, who works mostly with female veterans, is chipping away at several projects to improve veterans' postwar health care. In the past six months she has cultivated a waiting area for female veterans separate from the general waiting area, complete with a gurgling fountain, stacks of magazines, a large buffalo tapestry and a dream catcher hanging from her office nameplate.

"They don't want to sit out there with the guys," Fry says, waving her hand to the other side of the clinic. "Those were the perpetrators. When you're in the military, and you're a woman, and you're around men, they are all staring at you. You are always on watch."